More cases may emerge but a major cluster unlikely: Experts

More infections could emerge after a 32-year-old man who had dinner with 12 family members tested positive for Covid-19, but with contact tracing and other measures, there is a good chance this will not lead to a major cluster, experts said.

On Thursday night, the Ministry of Health (MOH) reported Singapore’s first community case in more than two weeks – a Singaporean marine service engineer who tested positive four days after a family dinner last Saturday at Seoul Garden in Tampines Mall. He went to see a doctor after coming down with a fever and sore throat.

The group occupied three tables and there was mingling, despite rules that state no more than five diners per group.

Professor Dale Fisher, senior consultant at the division of infectious diseases at the National University Hospital, told The Straits Times: “It is quite possible that he may have passed it on and there will be a second generation of cases – a small cluster. But provided those contacts are quarantined when diagnosed, then the transmission chain will stop there.

“It is a credit to Singapore’s enhanced surveillance that it was picked up. This gives us the best chance to stop further spread early.”

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said: “I am not particularly concerned that this single case will suddenly result in a large outbreak within the community since contact tracing will identify anyone that has been exposed and these people will be quarantined and tested.”

Even if the man goes on to infect others in his networks, the present protocols around contact tracing will be able to halt the transmission chain, he noted.

Prof Teo said: “Remember that we have had community cases since February, and the protocols have worked well to handle any emerging clusters.”

Still, the incident is a stark reminder that safe distancing and other measures must be taken seriously, the experts stressed.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the same school, said: “If the five-person rule had been adhered to, then rather than 12 family members potentially at risk, only four would be.”

Prof Teo said: “Having a stretch of zero community cases does not mean that we can let down our guard. The reality is that the public health measures that have been imposed are meant to serve two purposes. First, to prevent outbreaks in the community, and second, should there be an outbreak, the spread is slowed down sufficiently to allow contact tracing, testing and quarantining to come in to break any chains of transmissions in the community.”

Professor Gavin J. Smith, interim director of the emerging infectious diseases programme at the Duke-NUS Medical School, said: “The virus has not been eradicated and we need to be prepared for occasional cases. People sticking to the control measures makes the job of preventing further spread a lot easier.”

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