13 guests on SHN may have caught virus while at Mandarin Orchard

Hotel undergoes disinfection after checking out guests; staff being tested for Covid-19

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Thirteen people, who had been classified as imported cases when they were confirmed to have Covid-19 last month, and had served their stay-home notice (SHN) at the Mandarin Orchard Singapore hotel, may have been infected after they arrived here.

The incident has resulted in all hotel guests being progressively checked out of Mandarin Orchard, about 500 staff being tested for Covid-19, and the hotel being deep-cleaned and disinfected.

But experts said the matter is unlikely to spark a wave of infections here, given that more than a month has passed since they were confirmed to have Covid-19. That would have been enough for two incubation periods of 14 days each.

The reason the 13 people are suspected to have been infected here is that they had flown in from 10 different countries – such as the United States, South Korea, Britain, the Philippines and Bahrain – but have been infected by coronaviruses that have "high genetic similarity", implying that the infections may have come from one source.

The 13 guests had also all served their SHN in the same tower of the hotel between Oct 22 and Nov 11, and were confirmed to have Covid-19 between Nov 2 and 11.

In a joint statement yesterday, the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Singapore Tourism Board said: "This suggests that these cases were likely infected from a similar source."

Singapore routinely carries out genome sequencing and phylogenetic analysis of the virus – which tracks the family tree of the virus – from all confirmed cases. This normally takes about four weeks.

Once the link between the 13 cases surfaced, MOH looked deeper into the situation to see if transmission could have occurred locally, instead of before these people arrived here. The authorities said: "From MOH’s preliminary investigations, we cannot exclude that transmissions could have occurred at Mandarin Orchard Singapore. Genome sequencing and analysis are continuing for cases beyond Nov 11, they added.

MOH said it will now test all who are currently serving SHN at the Mandarin Orchard for Covid-19, instead of doing the test towards the end of their 14 days of SHN. Most have been tested.

It is also asking all guests who had stayed at the hotel since Nov 11 to monitor their health closely for 14 days from the last date of their stay. They should see a doctor if they develop symptoms such as a cough, sore throat, runny nose, fever and loss of taste or smell.

Although people serving SHN are housed in the 446 rooms on 28 floors of the hotel’s Main Tower – segregated from the other tower called the Orchard Wing – the hotel said it will check everyone out by today as a precaution.

The Mandarin Orchard incident surfaced even as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong recently announced that Singapore will further ease Covid-19 measures from Dec 28, due to the low rate of local transmission. This includes allowing eight people to dine out together, up from the current five.

Associate Professor Alex Cook of the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, who specialises in biostatistics and modelling, does not think the possible spread of the virus at the hotel would derail this.

He said: "I’d be surprised if there was substantial undetected local spread between then and now."

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Experts look at possible factors behind infections

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People serving stay-home notice (SHN) are isolated to prevent them from transmitting the disease to anyone else should they have Covid-19.

Despite that, 13 people on SHN at the Mandarin Orchard Singapore hotel may have been infected during their stay there, given the close similarity of the genome of the virus they had been infected by.

They had come to Singapore from 10 different countries.

Experts said that there were various ways this could have happened.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong of the Duke-NUS Medical School, who specialises in emerging infectious diseases and microbiology, said that hotel-based transmission should be investigated and standard operating procedures should be audited for compliance.

In its statement yesterday, the Ministry of Health and the Singapore Tourism Board said: “The Government takes a serious view of any breach in protocols and will investigate and take action should there be non-compliance.”

Associate Professor Hou Li Yang of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, an infectious diseases expert by training, said that since the 13 people had served SHN between Oct 22 and Nov 11, and were confirmed to be infected between Nov 2 and Nov 11, a single source for the spread of the virus is unlikely.

He added: “If they did not encounter one another during their stay, then it could be the hotel staff or fomites (objects that formed the transmission chain).”

Whether the spread could have been through towels and bed sheets would “depend on how those were distributed after cleaning”, he said.

His colleague, Associate Professor Alex Crock, vice-dean of research at the school, pointed out that given the duration, the last of the 13 people would have checked into the hotel after the first had left. People are placed on SHN for up to 14 days.

Prof Crock added that it would be interesting to know if there was any “spatial clustering” of the 13 people, such as them staying in rooms on the same floor near one another.

Dr Aed Kurup, who chairs the Academy of Medicine’s Chapter of Infectious Disease Physicians, said aside from transmission via number of staff or some objects, ventilation and sewage also need to be looked at as possible sources of transmission.

But due to the way the coronavirus spreads, Dr Kurup said: “a human factor is more likely” to be the cause of any transmission in the hotel.

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