Experts address concerns over infected SIA steward who drove for Grab

They say safety measures, robust contact tracing reduce likelihood of cluster forming

Goh Yan Han and Shabana Begum

Concerns about the risk of Covid-19 transmission to passengers by the Singapore Airlines (SIA) steward who worked as a part-time Grab driver are valid, but mask wearing and other precautions taken, as well as the robust contact tracing system here, will mitigate the likelihood of a cluster forming.

Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore, said that while there is indeed a higher risk of infection for passengers picked up by the infected Grab driver, contact tracing and isolating those exposed will limit any virus spread.

“There will always be such incidents cropping up in future, and that is exactly why everyone in the community needs to remain vigilant and our testing and contact tracing efforts cannot cease,” he noted.

The 48-year-old steward was detected through proactive testing arranged by the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) for air crew who had returned from overseas flights. He had travelled to the United States for work from Dec 12 to Dec 16. After his return, he worked part-time as a Grab driver from Dec 17 to 24.

The man was tested on Dec 23 and results came back inconclusive on Dec 25. A second test on Dec 25 was also inconclusive. He remained at home until Dec 27, when he was confirmed to be infected.

The Ministry of Health said last Wednesday that passengers who took the Grab ride are being tracked down through contact tracing. It added that any passenger deemed to be a close contact of the man will have to be quarantined.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said: “It’s hard to imagine a worse possible situation than having someone potentially exposed to viruses overseas being able to bypass quarantine, and coming into contact with a large number of people in a closed environment like a private-hire car.”

But he noted that Grab had put in place precautions like mask wearing and barring passengers from sitting in the front seat.

Prof Cook said the firm can also identify passengers who rode in the particular vehicle during that week.

Prof Teo added that while there is a small risk of a community cluster developing, if a passenger is infected and spreads the virus to others in his or her social network, contact tracing will be able to identify the rest and they will be isolated as well.

Dr Leong Hoe Nam, an infectious diseases expert at Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, called for more measures to be introduced for air crew; either by implementing a 14-day stay-home notice period, though it would impair the airline’s ability to function; more frequent Covid-19 testing; or mandatory vaccination.

The CAAS had announced last Wednesday that it was tightening safety measures after two SIA personnel – a pilot and the steward who worked as a part-time Grab driver – tested positive for the virus.

Airl ine crew here had been exempt from stay-home notice since March, provided precautions were taken to minimise their risk of exposure to the virus.

The CAAS also said those who have layovers in high-risk destinations will be required to undergo polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests on arrival, and on the third and seventh day following their return to Singapore. They must self-isolate until they receive a negative result from their seventh-day PCR test.

In addition, air crew on layovers will be required to further minimise their contact with locals. For example, food delivered through room service should be left outside the room at the door.

Last Tuesday, Grab said the SIA steward who worked as a part-time driver had been temporarily suspended from its platform as a safety precaution.

Source: The Straits Times © Singapore Press Holdings Ltd.
Permission required for reproduction