

Coronavirus Multi-ministry Taskforce update

Singapore working to secure portfolio of vaccines, says Gan

Not relying on just one vaccine will allow it to cater to different segments of the population

Rei Kurohi

Singapore will work on securing a portfolio of Covid-19 vaccines to cater to different segments of the population instead of relying on one vaccine, Health Minister Gan Kim Yong said yesterday.

He also said negotiations with American pharmaceutical company Pfizer and various others that are conducting clinical trials on vaccines are ongoing.

Given the expected global demand, diversifying Singapore's vaccine portfolio will improve its chances of securing a suitable vaccine, he said at a virtual press conference by the Multi-ministry Taskforce tackling Covid-19.

Details on which vaccines will make the list and which segments of the population will receive a vaccine are still being worked out, he added.

Mr Gan noted that the Government will have to take into account varying efficacy and safety profiles for different groups when deciding how to vaccinate the population.

For example, some vaccines may not be effective for children and others may not be effective for seniors, he said.

Mr Gan further said that even when vaccines become available, they will have to be given out progressively as it is not possible to vaccinate the entire nation at once.

Depending on the nature of the vaccine, Singapore may decide not to vaccinate all its citizens, he added.

Healthcare workers fighting the virus on the front lines will likely get first priority, followed by vulnerable groups like seniors who may develop more severe symptoms as a result of infection, Mr Gan said.

The Ministry of Health's director of medical services Kenneth Mak

noted that one vaccine candidate developed by Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech was recently found to be more than 90 per cent effective against Covid-19.

He said that while this is welcome news, more information about it as well as others that are close to finishing phase three trials is needed.

For instance, if the vaccines do not provide long-lasting immunity, a patient may need repeated vaccinations instead of a single dose.

Associate Professor Mak noted that there are efforts to promote local development of a vaccine as well. He cited an ongoing trial involving a partnership between American pharmaceutical company Arcturus Therapeutics and Duke-NUS Medical School.

"We are hopeful that these studies, these collaborations, will give us a suite of vaccine candidates that can provide good results for our population," he said.

Mr Gan said an expert committee on Covid-19 vaccination, set up last month, will assess the data coming out of the trials and advise the ministry on its vaccination

strategy. "In the meantime, it is important to continue to ensure that our safe distancing measures or precautionary measures are in place, and we continue to observe personal hygiene and so on," said the minister.

"This will help reduce the overall infection rate in Singapore."

Responding to a question on the committee, Prof Mak said its members come from different sectors and agencies, including both academic and clinical institutions.

He said confidential information obtained by the ministry from discussions with pharmaceutical companies will be given to the committee, subject to a confidentiality agreement, to help it conduct a detailed review and make recommendations.

More details of the committee's mission and composition will be released soon, he added.

His ministry will begin educating people on the importance and benefits of vaccination so that they can make informed decisions on taking part in vaccination efforts, he said.

rei@sph.com.sg

MULTIPLE VACCINE CANDIDATES

We are hopeful that these studies, these collaborations, will give us a suite of vaccine candidates that can provide good results for our population.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR KENNETH MAK, the Ministry of Health's director of medical services, referring to local efforts to develop a vaccine.

VIGILANCE MUST CONTINUE

In the meantime, it is important to continue to ensure that our safe distancing measures or precautionary measures are in place, and we continue to observe personal hygiene and so on.



HEALTH MINISTER GAN KIM YONG



Health Minister Gan Kim Yong (centre), Education Minister Lawrence Wong (right) and Associate Professor Kenneth Mak at a briefing on the Covid-19 situation yesterday. Mr Gan said that even when vaccines become available, they will have to be given out progressively as it is not possible to vaccinate the entire nation at once. PHOTO: MCI