

S'pore still ranks high in vaccination pace despite supply constraints

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Singapore kicked off mass vaccination at the start of the year but lags behind countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel in vaccine roll-out because of supply constraints, experts said.

Slightly more than one-third of the population in Singapore have received at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, and about one-quarter are fully vaccinated.

This places it behind countries that have managed to give at least one dose to nearly or more than half of their populations, which has allowed them to gradually ease Covid-19 restrictions even as the threat of new variants looms.

Still, Singapore is among the top 25 countries in the world in terms of Covid-19 vaccination, said Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, vice-dean of global health at the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

He said the speed of vaccination should pick up once there are "adequate continuous supplies" of approved vaccines.

"Every country would love to be vaccinating faster, but obviously, globally, demand outstrips supply," said Professor Dale Fisher, a senior consultant in infectious diseases at the National University Hospital.

He said Singapore has a steady supply, and is in a good place as all long-term residents will have the opportunity to be vaccinated in the next few months.

Some, however, think the process could have been faster.

"Ideally, we should have vacci-



People waiting in the observation area at the Covid-19 vaccination centre at Yew Tee Community Club last week, after receiving their jabs. Slightly more than one-third of the population in Singapore have been given at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, with about one-quarter fully vaccinated. This places it behind countries that have managed to give at least one dose to nearly or more than half of their populations. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

nated more people by now – perhaps at the level of other small high-income countries such as Israel or the United Arab Emirates," said Professor Paul Tambyah, president of

the Asia-Pacific Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infection.

Based on what he has gleaned from official reports, the main constraint is the lack of vaccine sup-

ply, he said, noting that the distribution seems to be fairly efficient.

"The vaccines have proved effective in reducing the current wave of infections, but it is possible that

we would have had even fewer cases if we had a higher rate of vaccination," he said.

The reasons for the supply constraints here are unclear, but in Is-

rael, for instance, inoculation has been speedy as the country paid a premium and struck a deal with Pfizer to supply the vaccine maker with data from its vaccination drive.

Some people here adopted a wait-and-see approach to vaccination initially, given the low case numbers in Singapore earlier this year.

Efforts to ramp up the pace of vaccination by boosting supply have run up against global shortages.

"Some countries have intercepted supplies headed for another country, and it would not be the right thing for Singapore to do," said Prof Fisher.

"We have the highest vaccination rate in Asia and I don't think we need a change in approach as we are doing very well."

The Singapore Government said last week that it would stretch out the interval between doses to six to eight weeks, to ensure nearly everyone – or 4.7 million people – gets at least one shot by early August.

Although new data from a single British study showed that protection against the B16172 variant after a single dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was only 33 per cent, "this is better than nothing," said Prof Hsu.

The B16172 variant, which was first found in India and is now found in at least 53 territories, has been linked to the Changi Airport cluster, currently the largest here, and the Tan Tock Seng Hospital cluster.

"Ultimately, we can probably only drop most of the current restrictions and measures after the majority of the population has been vaccinated," Prof Hsu said.

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