

Call to step up preparedness for Covid-19 surge as China opens up travel

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysia needs to keep close tabs on not only China but also other countries, as there may be a need to be more restrictive on travel if there is a significant rise in Covid-19 deaths or severe illness reported in other countries.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai said looking at the current situation in China, MMA proposes that only fully vaccinated travellers from China with negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test results be allowed entry into Malaysia.

“Upon arrival, they should undergo professional rapid test kit (RTK) antigen screening (within 24 hours), similar to the system adopted in April when Malaysia reopened its borders.

“While in the country, travellers will need to adhere to our SOP such as the requirement to wear face masks on public transport.”

On Malaysia’s preparedness for a surge, he said MMA believes that after three years of the pandemic, steps have been taken by the government to be better prepared.

“We should be prepared for any eventuality. It must also be ensured that in the event of a surge, non-Covid care can still continue unhindered.”

He added that Malaysia should also be adopting the concept of pandemic-prepared private clinics, which MMA had proposed to the Ministry of Health (MOH), but there has been no response to the idea.

Muruga Raj said primary care via the close to 9,000 private general practitioners, as the country has seen, has an important role in managing pandemics.

“As for booster shots, regardless of China opening up travel, those in the high-risk category have been advised to take their second booster dose.”

Health Director-General Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said MOH will continue to step up its preparedness to face a possible hike in the number of daily Covid cases and deaths following the surge of infections in China.

He said among the measures to be taken was to increase the percentage of booster dose uptake to reduce the severity of infections and the risk of death.

“MOH is urging all eligible individuals to take the booster dose of the vaccine so that the Malaysian population gets optimal protection against Covid-19,” he said, adding that MOH

will also strengthen the country's Covid management through the digitisation of health management by improving the automated "find, test, trace, isolate and support" approach.

Noor Hisham said MOH will also ensure that all Covid assessment centres are ready to receive a high number of patients.

Universiti Malaya professor of epidemiology and public health Dr Sanjay Rampal said the Covid variants in China are the same as the variants all over the world and in Malaysia.

He said the reason China is hitting the news with a huge number of infections is because its people were "immune naive" and did not get themselves immunised, adding that it was the same here in Malaysia during the Covid outbreak.

"There can be specific screening for tourists arriving from China but to test every Chinese tourist is easier said than done because it will be operationally very difficult and the costs will be prohibitive.

"One option is to take a random sample of passengers of about 20% of all arrivals per plane load.

"The other option is to test everyone but it is the passenger who will have to pay for the test. Although it is not expensive, some people may not like it."

He said MOH will need to quickly identify and isolate Chinese tourists who have fever and conduct a Covid test on them.

The idea of a person testing a day before a flight will have no real impact because the person could get infected after the test, Sanjay said.

"It is important for Chinese tourists to provide an immunisation certificate for two vaccine shots. They must also register with MySejahtera and quickly isolate themselves if they have symptoms. They will need to conduct a Covid-19 test."

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents president Datuk Tan Kok Liang said the organisation was waiting for information from the authorities on who will be allowed to travel from China to Malaysia.

He said it was important to have a mechanism to control and prevent the spread of Covid-19 from tourists arriving from China.

"Carrying out Covid-19 test on arriving Chinese tourists is an option but at the moment, it seems only investors and students might be allowed to travel out of China. We hope for the leisure market to open up, but steps must be taken to protect the country. The nation cannot afford another disaster similar to the nationwide shutdown to prevent the spread Covid-19, which lasted two years."