

Covid test upon arrival not practical, experts say



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This is following the detection of yet another new variant for the virus

by AUFA MARDHIAH / pic by BERNAMA

TEST upon arrival for Covid-19 at the airports nationwide is no longer practical as the nation moves towards endemicity, experts said.

It was recently reported that few countries such as Japan had detected yet another new variant, the Omicron XE, which raised public concerns on Covid's standard operating procedures (SOPs) that was perceived to be more lax these days.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai said the public should expect the virus to mutate and remain observant with precautions set to avoid any complications.

“Using the current RTK-Ag and RT-PCR tests will not be able to pick out the XE variant. To do that, a genomic sequencing will need to be done at laboratory level. It will require all positive cases picked up on arrival at international borders to be sent for the variants

to be identified, which is not practical at this time as we are not doing mandatory testing on arrivals,” he told *The Malaysian Reserve (TMR)*.

“We know that the Omicron variant has less severe symptoms compared to the Delta variant and we expect the XE variant to be so too, but we will need to see the data as the disease progresses,” he added.

Meanwhile, public health physician and epidemiologist Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar suggested for the government to do selective surveillance and random sampling for the arrival of visitors.

He also explained that the new Omicron XE variant is identified as a recombinant variant (mixture of BA.1 and BA.2 sub lineages of Omicron) saying that the nature of the variant will become a mutation variant which after some time will arise into something new.

“For Omicron XE, there will be more infection and it spreads faster due to it being a new variant but after sometime it will disappear and there will be a surge of another new variant. Even though there are a lot of cases of Omicron XE in the UK currently, the infection is not as serious as the Delta variant or the early stage of Omicron,” he told *TMR*.

In terms of preparation against the new variant, he suggests for the people to maintain the current practices which are abiding by the SOPs and get complete vaccination, as through this, he believes that the people will be protected.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the recombination is common among coronaviruses and is regarded as an expected mutational event.

Furthermore, WHO reported that the early estimates based on limited preliminary data suggest that XE has a community growth rate advantage of about 10% compared to BA.2, however, this finding requires further confirmation.

The recombinant was first detected in the UK in January and was confirmed in March this year.

Thai news reported that the country has previously detected the new strain through genomic sequencing of a swab sample taken from a Thai patient shortly after WHO issued a warning against it.

Reuters recently reported that the BA.2 variant is the cause of the hike in cases in most European and Asian countries, and has since then been called the “stealth variant” as it is slightly more difficult to track than the other variants.