

# Experts: Don't unleash the Kraken

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PETALING JAYA: The Covid-19 standard operating procedure (SOP) needs to be tightened to deal with the expected influx of inbound tourists, say health experts.

They said this would be needed to prevent a surge of local transmissions, especially given the new variants of the virus.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia health economics and public health specialist Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh suggested measures such as a negative Covid-19 test prior to departure, proof of full vaccination and compulsory Covid-19 travel insurance.

She said this aligned with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) recommendations that travellers be fully vaccinated to reduce the risk of transmission and infection.

"I would prefer a negative test before entry, such as an RT-PCR test 48 hours (before entry).

"It's true the variant may already be in Malaysia, but the sheer number of tourists coming in can cause a surge among locals," she added.

Prof Sharifa Ezat said the effects of new strains of Covid-19 such as XBB or Kraken are still unknown, but cases in other countries have surged due to the new variants, even among the vaccinated.

"There are a few countries that pose risk of a higher transmission influx into Malaysia. Two of these are the United States and China, but by sheer number of visitors, China will bring in more tourists compared with the United States.

"Hence, there should be a tighter SOP and greater scrutiny – not discriminatory towards any country, but overall," she added.

Prof Sharifa Ezat said a phasic approach (in stages and in a controlled manner) is needed because a sudden surge of visitors could lead to a higher burden of infections in the local community.

While it is expected that cases will increase and stretch the healthcare system, she said it would not be as bad as the first and second waves of Covid-19 in 2020 and 2021, respectively, as most Malaysians are now vaccinated and boosted.

On Tuesday, the Health Ministry said it would maintain the current Covid-19 SOP for now and will examine seven key indicators in the country before deciding to tighten the rules, if necessary.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Muruga Raj Rajathurai said that since a Covid-19 test isn't required on tourists' departure and arrival, the Health Ministry must ensure continued surveillance efforts for the early detection of any imported cases of Covid-19, as well as genome sequencing of any new variants.

The MMA had previously urged the government to ensure that all travellers from countries seeing a significant rise in cases were fully vaccinated with proof of vaccination, and for them to conduct an RT-PCR test before departure and a professional RTK Antigen test within 24 hours of arrival.

Dr Muruga Raj called for the Health Ministry to strengthen the healthcare system with sufficient manpower to manage a high patient load should there be a surge in the number of cases, and to maintain the highest standards in care.

"We believe the Health Ministry has taken the necessary steps to prepare for any possibility of a surge, but we can't say if we are ready.

"We know, however, that there are some manpower shortages in many public healthcare facilities due to a maldistribution of healthcare workers in public hospitals and clinics around the country," he said.

He also encouraged the public to observe individual preventive measures such as wearing face masks in enclosed spaces, especially those who are in high-risk groups.

Federation of Private Medical Practitioners' Association Malaysia president Dr Steven Chow said the public currently needs an affirmative declaration from the ministry on whether Covid-19 is still a public health problem, and not make ad hoc changes to the SOP.

He said the Health Ministry should also provide historical and current data to support its position.

"If Covid-19 is no longer a public health problem, then all these ad hoc proposals are irrelevant and what is needed is just sensible precautions like with other common respiratory viral illnesses.

"Theoretically, we would have achieved the basic criteria of herd immunity based on the total prevalence of confirmed cases, completed vaccinated population, and projected undiagnosed infected cases.

"To create alarm at this stage is counter-productive to the process of the economic and mental health recovery of the nation, especially when there are effective specific antiviral medications available," he said.