Fake certs can dent public's trust in vaccination programme, say experts

By **Jason Thomas** - January 24, 2022 8:30 AM

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Police have raided several clinics selling fake Covid-19 vaccination certificates in Selangor, Johor, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu. (Bernama pic)

PETALING JAYA: The increasing reports of private clinics selling fake Covid-19 vaccination certificates will create doubt among the public on the high vaccination rate in the country, say experts.

Malaysia's vaccination programme has been a bright spot in the two-year pandemic, with the government easing restrictions as the rate rose after the first dose was given out on Feb 24 last year. As of Saturday, 97.9% of the adult population have completed two doses.

However, this month alone, police busted clinics selling fake Covid-19 vaccination certificates in Selangor, Johor, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu – with 5,601 patients registered as vaccine recipients in just the one clinic in Selangor, which allegedly threw away vaccines but issued legitimate digital vaccination certificates.

"It's very clear that this kind of behaviour results in an erosion of public trust and confidence in the vaccination programme," said Azrul Mohd Khalib of the Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy.

"However, I am confident that we have vaccinated most of the population, and these fraudulent cases represent a small minority of cases out there."

Dr Mark Cheong, a lecturer at Monash University Malaysia's school of pharmacy, noted how the national Covid-19 immunisation programme had been among the few highlights of the battle against the pandemic, and that the easing of restrictions had been "backed by confidence" in the high vaccination rate.

However, in light of reports about fake vaccination certificates, including a clinic in Terengganu said to have issued 1,900 such certificates, Cheong said the public may think twice about whether further easing of lockdown measures, such as allowing schools to resume, would be a wise move.

"It makes it very hard to get a good sense of how well protected we are as there are people flying under the radar with fake vaccine certificates," he said.

Cheong, whose research is focused on public health and access to healthcare services and medicines, also said there were other concerns at play.

"Let's say a number of people who claim to have been vaccinated later get infected but they have only got mild symptoms. If it turns out that they are not vaccinated, it will increase scepticism among them that vaccines are needed," he said.

Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) president Dr Koh Kar Chai said although "some may question" the high vaccination rate, the significant reduction in severe Covid-19 cases proved that the high rate was not a facade.

Federation of Private Medical Practitioners' Association Malaysia (FPMPAM) president Dr Steven Chow, however, said there had been a "trust deficit" in the vaccination programme from its onset, before private clinics were involved.

Chow noted how this "trust deficit" was first highlighted by the numerous cases of "empty syringe injections" and reports of negative antibody tests following vaccinations.

"The entire programme was planned and implemented from the top, and input from our private fraternity was not sought out," he said.

"It is clear that a comprehensive consultation of all stakeholders would have made a difference in how this programme could have been rolled out and abuses prevented."