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Public health comes first

Government must address the concerns of anti-vaxxers

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PETALING JAYA: Perhaps it's not too far-fetched to say that life is almost back to normal for an estimated 64% of Malaysian adults who have completed their Covid-19 jabs.

For one, they are now allowed to patronise most premises such as restaurants and hair salons.

Health experts say this will persuade those reluctant to take the vaccine to change their mind.

Universiti Malaya Department of Social and Preventive Medicine Faculty of Medicine Prof Dr Moy Foong Ming said using the carrot and stick approach might work in getting them to opt for vaccination.

"This is good to be implemented in states with high vaccination rates, as only a small proportion of people will be unvaccinated and usually this group is vaccine hesitant.

"However, this may be unfair in states with a shortage of vaccine supply where the individuals are actually keen to be vaccinated but their turn is not up yet due to slow supply," she said.

Since August, the government has gradually eased the restrictions for the fully vaccinated.

Under the National Security Council's SOP, dine-in, camping and picnics within the same district, as well as non-contact outdoor sports

and exercise, are allowed for the fully vaccinated.

Among the other privileges include patronising business outlets such as car wash, electrical and electronic shops, furniture, household goods, sports shops, car accessories, clothing, jewellery and night and weekend markets.

Dr Moy acknowledged that it is a person's right to decide whether he wants to be vaccinated.

But if that right infringes on public health and fairness, then vaccination may need to be made mandatory, she said.

"Having vaccination will reduce the risks of infection and spreading the disease to others although not 100%.

"Unvaccinated seniors who become infected also face a higher risk of falling seriously ill," she said, adding that if many unvaccinated people get seriously ill it would affect the healthcare system.

However, Dr Moy felt that unvaccinated individuals should not be denied from entering premises such as electrical shops or shopping malls.

"If the management of the shops or malls can enforce the SOP strictly, for example, physical distancing through reducing the number of shoppers by 50% in the outlet area, mask wearing for all, hand hygiene and others, then the risk of Covid-19 transmission may be controlled.

"But I agree that dine-in should only be open to people who are vaccinated, as it involves removal of masks, which is very high risk for infection," she said.

She urged the government to address the concerns of those who declined to be vaccinated by providing counselling.

"If addressing such concerns is ineffective, a mandate may be considered 'necessary' to achieve public health objectives. Therefore, imposing different measures on individuals who are vaccinated or unvaccinated is not a form of discrimination, but for the public health of the nation," she said.

Malaysian Public Health Physicians Association president Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said hopes for the recovery of the country are placed on the national vaccination programme and SOP.

"At the moment, we are depending on the full coverage of the vaccination. If we vaccinate 80% of the population, it actually only covers 60% as we have to take into consideration children under 17 years old, anti-vaxxers and those who are not eligible to be vaccinated. So, we need more than 80% of the population to be vaccinated," he said.

As such, he said having a policy to only allow those who are fully vaccinated into a premises would encourage those who have not received the vaccine, to get it.

However, he said discrimination against those who have not been vaccinated should not happen.

He suggests that these people have a certificate to show that they are unable to be vaccinated.

"Only after we have achieved high coverage, can we give some relaxation to those who decline the vaccine, but for now they perhaps have to suffer the consequences first," he said.

SMS Deen Jewellers Sdn Bhd chief executive officer Mohamad Shaifudeen Mohamed Sirajudeen said he was thankful for the government's policy to allow only fully vaccinated adults into shops such as his.

Otherwise, he said he would have a tough time convincing customers to comply.

Mohamad Shaifudeen said there should be more awareness raised so that people would be informed which premises would require patrons to be fully vaccinated.

He also commended the enforcement authorities and the Health Ministry to ensure businesses comply with the ruling.

"Even two doses do not guarantee safety, so I think it requires everyone's cooperation.

"We have been through it together all this while, we just have to put up with it a while more. I'm sure we will be out of this together," he said.