

Editorial

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Covid-19 Impasse: Time to Co-exist with the Pandemic

Since Covid-19 originated from the Chinese city of Wuhan, of Hubei province more than two years ago, it has spread worldwide at an amazing speed to the extent that every country has reported cases. Hitherto nearly 450 million Covid-19 cases have been reported globally with more than 6 million deaths. The world was unprepared to face a pandemic of such magnitude leaving experts perplexed and grappling to formulate suitable control measures, expecting for a vaccine to be developed. Covid-19 has proven to be the ultimate challenge not only in the field of medicine and public health, but also in terms of financial and economic sustainability, especially to strike a balance between life and livelihood of the people.

Initial efforts by the Malaysian government to curb the spread and transmission of Covid-19 saw the implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020. Since then, the government has imposed various versions of MCO, namely conditional movement control order (CMCO), enhanced movement control order (EMCO) and recovery movement control order (RMCO). The MCO that was first introduced in March 2020 required people to stay indoors resulting in schools, non-essential workplace, and businesses to be closed. Added to these measures were the suspension of interstate travel. The restrictions that initially lasted for 3 months necessitated to be repeated a few times has left an unfavorable effect on the country and its people.

In 2020, the Malaysian economy contracted by 5.6% and the unemployment rate crept to 4.9% recording as many as 773,200 unemployed persons.¹ School and university students were forced to resort to online learning (e-learning). This impacted those appearing for major exams or requiring hands-on or lab-based work having to face difficulties and struggling to cope.

MENTAL HEALTH

Fear of contracting Covid-19, limited family interactions due to the enforced physical distancing and travel restrictions. This was compounded by being unemployed, facing difficulties to provide food for family, worry about academic transitions and requirements. The uncertainty of what future holds have led to rising mental health problems not only in our country but globally as well.

IS VACCINE THE ANSWER?

Malaysia started the vaccine roll out in Feb 2021 and due to the accelerated National Covid-19 Immunization Program, 84.2% of the population have received their 1st dose, 79% received the 2nd dose and 47.9% completed the booster doses (as of 27th March 2022).² Thus far, vaccine has proven to be effective at reducing risk of severe infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. Despite these benefits, vaccine acceptance has faced impediments due to the concern about its efficacy, potential side effects particularly with the speed vaccines developed using new technology (mRNA vaccines). This was compounded by delays in obtaining regulatory approval processes in some situations. Another significant issue that has adversely affected the program among the Muslims is the concern about the vaccines containing ingredients derived from forbidden sources (*haram*).

ENDEMIC PHASE

Moving towards the endemic phase does not mean the end of Covid-19 nor is it moving to a milder form, enabling life to return to the pre-pandemic state. A combination of vaccines and existing health inequities especially in the low-income and middle-income countries

along with waning immunity in elderly groups will lead to periodic outbreaks. These occurrences may cause the virus to spread, replicate and evolve to potentially become more dangerous and transmissible as evident over the past two years.³ The Wuhan strain originally detected in late 2019 underwent several mutations to become firstly the variant known as 614G in 2020, followed by Alpha, Beta, Delta (2021) and the latest variant, Omicron, first reported to World Health Organization (WHO) back in November 2021. None of the experts were able to predict the emergence of Omicron and its frenetic spread. It has surpassed Delta to become the current major variant across the globe. At the time of penning this article, the subvariant BA.2 strain is creating chaos in Hong Kong with the healthcare system on the verge of collapse.

Despite experiencing the Omicron wave resulting in a surge in reported positive cases and hospital admissions nationwide since late January this year, the restrictions in the new guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health have been relaxed. Boosted asymptomatic close contacts will no longer be required to undergo home quarantine effective March 1st, 2022. The new measures are intended to facilitate the nation's economic recovery by opening the border to permit travelers back into the country without mandatory quarantine. These are among the steps taken by the government to prepare the country to gradually move out (transition stage) of the pandemic phase in conjunction with most other countries worldwide.

The recently released document titled "Living with Covid-19" by the government of England demonstrated their intention to implement bold measures such as removal of domestic restrictions but concurrently cautioning the people to be mindful of preventive measures like prompt vaccination, ensuring adequate ventilation, wearing masks in crowded space and testing if symptomatic.⁴ It would be interesting to see whether we would continue to impose certain restrictions like mandatory vaccination to dine-in at restaurants when emergence of Omicron demonstrated the vulnerability of even those who were fully vaccinated.

CONCLUSION

Apart from the dilemma of trying to navigate through Covid-19, we must accept the inevitable and get accustomed to living with Covid-19. This was aptly demonstrated by the emergence of Omicron that is 2.7 – 3.7 times more infectious than delta in vaccinated and boosted people and also rate of waning immunity (only 78% after receipt of booster dose).^{5,6} Would the currently available vaccine be effective against other variants in future? Only time will tell. Until the development of vaccines that can prevent infection (primary prevention), we must continue to actively promote vaccination in conjunction with other public health and social preventive measures to reduce the intensity of spread. At present, no one can predict the future of this outbreak. Ironically, the expert in this instance is none other than the virus itself.

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