Get ready for the new normal in public health

Jeremy Lim
For The Straits Times

In the last two decades, the world has been stricken by multiple disease outbreaks including SARS, HIV, H1N1, Ebola, and now the coronavirus that originated from Wuhan in China.

It’s time to get real about the prevalence and risk of infectious diseases. This is the new normal.

We will continue to see novel infections emerge, and Singapore will continue to be exceptionally vulnerable, given our position as a major transportation hub and the density of our population.

In accordance with this new normal, we must fortify ourselves as a country, commit resources to enhancing our capacity, and prepare ourselves well.

What should we do? Three broad suites of actions are needed:

**NEW SOCIAL BEHAVIOURS AND NORMS**

Medical professionals have for decades been exhorting individuals who are sick to be both responsible and minimise contact with others and to wear masks if venturing out is necessary. For everyone, well or otherwise, good hygiene measures, including washing hands regularly and not touching one’s eyes and nose with unwashed hands, have been repeatedly directed. These pieces of advice have been repeatedly ignored until recently. During this crisis, we should proactively think about how to maintain these behaviours as new norms in response to the new normal in public health.

I once climbed Sydney Harbour Bridge as part of a tour and upon completion of the climb, our guide handed in wet wipes as there were parts of the climb where we encountered some oil and grime. All of us grabbed the wipes and started cleaning ourselves, except the Japanese, who first wiped down the individual safety equipment we had been provided with, only after that did they clean their hands and arms.

Jeremy Lim is co-director of global health at the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

**BALANCE BETWEEN CONTAINMENT AND NORMALITY**

“Better safe than sorry” is a common refrain but worryingly often just wrong. Unless reviewed on a daily basis, given the dynamic realities of unfolding outbreaks, it is a refuge for lazy policymaking and pandering to populist sentiments.

Uranium-238 is a rare isotope that is not readily available for use in public health or nuclear warfare.

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