Gradual opening up is wisest course, say experts

It’s crunch time for businesses. With the economy suffering, jobs are being lost and some firms are closing. Health experts say opening up too quickly could lead to a second wave of infections even worse than the first. Many businesses agree. And experts are relieved that phase two may come sooner. But there are also calls for more clarity on government measures.

Salma Kallik Senior Health Correspondent

Singapore has opted for phasing in the easing of circuit breaker measures over several weeks, perhaps even months, despite the fear that the number of new community cases might tail off.

Some are asking if Singapore is moving too slowly, as the economy is suffering and people are feeling the strain of the second lockdown.

But a graduated opening is the wisest course, say experts.

Based on experience with past pandemics, opening up the country too quickly could lead to a second wave of infections that is even worse than the first, said Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

During a panel discussion on The Big Story on Friday, he said: "There will be countries that will definitely experience a second wave of infection. And we are not from experience with the Spanish flu that the second wave can be much more deadly than the first wave."

The Spanish flu, which started in 1918 and lasted two years, killed more than 50 million people. Some estimates say as many as 50 million with the majority of the victims being in the second wave caused by re-infections and re-epidemics.

Professor David Heumann, infectious disease epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, agreed that "a phased approach is very important." Each country has to do its own risk assessment of different sectors and "see where transmission has occurred in the past and where it might be safe to open up first," he said.

Professor Heumann's slower approach in easing measures will be better in the long run, he said: "If we do a second wave, it will be very different from the first wave. Very aggressive testing, very complete contact tracing - we will be able to stop it on time. But countries that do not contact trace and quickly notice people infected with Covid-19 are not guaranteed to experience a second wave," he said.

Sensitive governments "are putting in place very slow easing, and this stress testing of different sectors, allowing particular sectors to recover in a slow manner, because this is the only way that you can figure out which sector in your particular country is likely to experience a resurgence of infection."

But he cautioned that what works in one country may not necessarily work in another because of cultural, political and fiscal differences.

Singapore was caught off guard by the surge of cases in foreign workers' dormitories in March. That outbreak, in spite of measures the Government has since deployed to test and separate groups of workers, is still raging.

Though the number of new cases among these workers has fallen from the high of 1,000 a day seen last month, the outbreak is not under control, with hundreds of workers infected every day.

Professor Lee Boon Liong, executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, also does not believe in rushing too soon to normality.

"It is important for us to take this important measure. For every step that we take, we learn from it and we adjust along the way till one day we know more about this virus and we know a better coping mechanism," he said.

Some people have pointed out that the easing of restrictions at phase two was taken after a longer period of no new local cases and that phase two is now a safer bet given that fall in the number of new cases.

"We have people to work on-site, children going to school, the public taking public transportation, all of these activities can have a very low risk if everyone is taking the necessary precautions - or they could be at very high risk if people are behaving irresponsibly and not taking personal responsibility," Dr Lee said.

Professor Heumann also warned that we still need to see if these restrictions work. If not, we will need to be able to react and change the strategy quickly. The virus is not going away and we have to live with it. The world has to continue to adjust to the new normal that we have to adapt to."

"A GLAD TEST"

This is why, although a parent like Professor Teo Yik Ying might like to see his two children (in Primary 4 and 6) back to school full time, Singapore's decision to allow children to physically return to school only on alternative weeks is a good move. The student said: "It is actually a very good way to test the system."

While it is believed that children are less likely to get infected, if infected, to have a milder illness, they could bring the disease home to other families.

Professor Heumann praised the way Singapore has initiated the circuit breaker measures, starting with fewer measures but adding more when there was a need.

As a result, the transmission of the coronavirus in the community has been kept low. Singapore has also planned its exit strategy with the aim of keeping community spread low.

"It is very difficult to move back and forth. People are mostly asymptomatic or very mildly symptomatic, which is what is happening in many European countries," he said.

As to whether it is safe for restaurants to reopen for dine-in, once people cannot wear masks when eating. Professor Heynnatz said: "Many restaurants in Europe have opened up but only sans salle, while others are opening up inside with physical distancing between tables. We will see what that brings. And I think they will always be ready to lock down again if necessary."

Professor Leong said of having to balance hospital capacity to treat and allowing economic activity to return. Opening up slowly and keeping the number of Covid-19 patients low will allow the healthcare system to take care of patients suffering from other health issues.

The Ministry of Health had told public hospitals in February to hold back on non-urgent treatments, fearing a surge in Covid-19 cases that would require large numbers of hospital beds.

"There have been many different models of how the healthcare services have been operating," he said. "We need to see how that will be possible only if Singapore does not face a surge in cases once the circuit breaker measures are relaxed."

"STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH"

For every step that we take, we learn from it and we adjust along the way. If we know more about this virus and have a better coping mechanism, we might be able to move to the next one.