

'INVEST TO STRENGTHEN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM'

PETALING JAYA: The government has been advised to invest money, that would otherwise be lost through a prolonged lockdown, into augmenting the public health system.

Universiti Malaya professor of epidemiology and public health Dr Sanjay Rampal said restrictions on movements proved to be very costly for the country.

"It would be more cost-effective to allow economic activities to resume and put more funds into improving our healthcare system," he said.

An economist told theSun last week the Malaysian economy had already lost about RM500 billion since the first movement control order was imposed on March 18, last year.

Data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, released in February, showed that the country's gross domestic product had contracted by 5.6% last year, its worst since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1998.

Sanjay said it would be pertinent now for the nation to move into the next phases of the National Recovery Plan.

"It now appears that the coronavirus will be here for the foreseeable future so we must learn to live with it in a sustainable manner."

He said there is also a likelihood that an increase in transmission of Covid-19 could help those who are vaccinated achieve natural immunity over time.

"But for now, the vaccine is still the most effective way to decrease the risk of severe illness if one gets infected."

He added those who refused vaccination would have to live with a higher risk of severe symptoms if they are infected.

Sanjay said the Delta variant appears to be more contagious than previous strains, raising the risk of transmission and severe morbidity for adults who are not vaccinated.

Sanjay said the World Health Organisation stated that booster shots should only be considered once global demand has eased to ensure vaccine equity. He added that any vaccine meant to serve as a booster should be enhanced to fight newer strains.

Galen Centre for Health and Social Policy founder and chief executive officer Azrul Mohd Khalib said economic activities should have resumed earlier.

He said new variants will inevitably emerge and spread across the globe.

"However, we can address this by strictly observing the standard operating procedures such as ensuring hand hygiene, wearing face masks and avoiding crowds."

Azrul added there is no evidence to show that new variants are more dangerous than their predecessors.

“What is dangerous is refusing the vaccine and exposing yourself to serious illness and death.”

Azrul stressed that Malaysia has to ensure that the vaccination campaign will cover a more wider area.

“We should reach out to local communities such as the homeless and those living in remote areas.”

Azrul said Malaysians have to accept the fact that Covid-19 infections will continue to occur, even when more than 90% of the population are vaccinated.

On the bright side, Azrul said the vaccines currently available have been widely effective in preventing severe symptoms, even for those who have been infected by the newer variants such as Delta, without the need for booster shots.

He said the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention has so far only recommended a three-shot regimen for people who are potentially immuno-compromised or have weakened immune systems such as cancer and organ transplant recipients.

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