

# Experts: Containing virus the best strategy

Much can – and, in fact, must – be done today to stop the spread of Covid-19, before the advent of a viable vaccine, said several experts from around the world.

Speaking at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine’s final Covid-19 webinar last night, they raised concerns that even when an effective vaccine emerges, there will not be enough for everyone, given the limited production capacity in the world today.

Instead, countries that have more successfully reduced transmission have shown that if everyone does his part, the disease can be contained – and this will remain the most effective strategy for some time to come.

The experts, led by World Health Organisation head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, also spoke of the need for global cooperation to overcome the pandemic that has impacted not just health, but also the economy and people’s livelihood.

They lauded the way scientists and doctors around the world have been sharing their research and discoveries, and done so at “unprecedented speed”.

Said Professor Chong Yap Seng, dean of the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore: “To survive in the short term, we need national solidarity. But to survive in the long term, we need global solidarity.”

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## What the experts say



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### FAILURE TO PREPARE

It has never been clearer that health is a political and economic choice. In the past 20 years, countries have invested heavily in preparing for terrorist attacks but relatively little in preparing for the attack of a virus which, as the pandemic has proven, can be far more deadly, disruptive and costly.



**DR TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS**, director-general of the World Health Organisation.



PHOTO: REUTERS

### ALARM BELLS IGNORED

The Covid catastrophe is tragic for so many reasons, but in part because it was predictable. Alarms have been ignored for decades and promises to prepare have been broken. We have seen the cycles of crisis, concern, and then complacency.



**DR MARGARET HAMBURG** of the US National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, and former commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration.



PHOTO: NUS

### PUT SOCIETY BEFORE SELF

I am convinced that if we can put our hearts and minds to it, we can prevail, but it needs us all to acknowledge the importance of putting society before self, to maintain the discipline, to not be complacent.



**PROFESSOR DAVID NABARRO**, Imperial College London.



PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

### LESSONS FROM ASIA

People in Asia have had much solidarity among themselves, not only in understanding and doing prevention for themselves but also in preventing infection from others. Lessons that we have learnt in Asia will be very important, moving forward.



**PROFESSOR DAVID HEYMAN**, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.



PHOTO: NUS

### NEED FOR HUMILITY

A few countries including Singapore were initially held up as models for other countries to follow in dealing with Covid-19. Without fail, all of them succumbed to huge outbreaks subsequently. There is a need for humility in the face of an unknown and unpredictable novel pathogen.



**PROFESSOR CHONG YAP SENG**, dean, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore.



PHOTO: PIRANHA PHOTOGRAPHY

### IMPACT ON THE VULNERABLE

Our societies are much more brittle than we thought. And this fact has important implications for how we manage the pandemic in the future, because the vulnerable groups in our societies have been starkly revealed... We are seeing that Covid-19, as is the case for all pandemics, strikes the poorest and the most vulnerable the hardest.



**PROFESSOR RICHARD HORTON**, editor-in-chief and publisher of *The Lancet*.

## Whole-of-nation effort vital in Covid-19 fight: MOH official

Clara Chong

A whole-of-nation effort is essential in combating Covid-19, the Ministry of Health's director of medical services Kenneth Mak said yesterday as he reflected on Singapore's experience over the past nine months.

A combination of factors has kept the country's fatality rate low, such as an effective public health system as well as the traditional management of clusters, including the early detection of cases, commitment and dedication towards isolating them and disrupting chains of transmissions, and the quarantining of close contacts, Associate Professor Mak said at a webinar titled Covid-19: Updates From Singapore.

The event was organised by the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and featured 16 speakers from around the world.

Prof Mak also cited the daring discipline to shut down – if necessary – services that contributed towards the spread of infection in the community.

Another critical factor in preventing deaths was a close watch over vulnerable patients and those at higher risk.

Prof Mak said: "We were determined to take those who were at higher risk and bring them into the hospital setting for closer monitoring and treatment, and by protecting those who are vulnerable, we have managed to keep the morbidity and complication rates low here in Singapore."

Despite Singapore's experience with the severe acute respiratory syndrome back in 2003, Covid-19 challenged the nation on various fronts: The Republic had to increase its lab capacity and the number of isolation and quarantine facilities and intensive care unit beds, as well as bring in additional resources and train new manpower, and recruit numerous volunteers to help fight the pandemic.

But through this ongoing episode of fighting Covid-19, the nation has learnt the importance of using new technologies and mastering new care models, as well as learnt the value of data and analysis, which help to drive contact tracing and to predict where the next cluster might erupt, Prof Mak said.

"We have learnt about how telehealth can change and disrupt... and bring new care models into our hospitals and primary care, we have learnt the value of public collaborations and... perhaps the most important lesson of all – the importance of maintaining public trust such that we would be confident that the public and the community, the society would be with us as we impose lockdowns, what we call locally the circuit breaker restriction of activities."

Prof Mak stressed the importance of maintaining global solidarity, to collaborate to develop new diagnostic tests, vaccines and therapeutics, as well as the importance of collaborations across the global front to allow nations worldwide to safely reopen borders and resume economic activity.

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## World cannot wait for vaccine, must work with tools at hand: Experts

The world cannot wait for, or expect, a vaccine to stop the pandemic. People and countries must work with the tools they have today, said many of the 16 speakers at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine's final Covid-19 webinar last night.

"It is not going away, we are not going to eradicate it in the foreseeable future, so we have got to learn to live with it as a constant threat, keeping it at bay, stopping it from welling up, getting on with our economic and social lives," said Profes-

or David Nabarro of Imperial College London.

Professor David Heymann of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said there is an "extraordinary amount of research and development on vaccines". But even with a successful vaccine, there is insufficient capacity in the world today to produce enough for all who need it.

Many experts, both local and international, also stressed the critical need for global solidarity to

overcome the pandemic.

Dr Margaret Hamburg of the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine in the United States said: "The biomedical research and health communities have come together in unprecedented ways, across disciplines and sectors and borders, and they have moved at unprecedented speed."

This, she said, gives her reason for optimism in the midst of the crisis.

Dr Marie-Paule Kieny of Inserm,

a public scientific and technological institute in France, said that there is "no alternative to global solidarity, because we are all there together".

She said some governments want to be able to immunise their whole population before anybody else gets the vaccine. "I think that this is not the way to go."

She hopes, in the rush for a vaccine, that no vaccine would be used before it is proven to be effective as that could lead to

greater "vaccine scepticism" and a loss of trust in children's vaccination programmes.

Dr Howard Njoo, Canada's deputy chief public health officer, said no country on its own will be able to beat the pandemic.

"Covid-19 is everywhere in the world, and I think the best way to beat this pandemic is for countries to learn from each other, share best practices and certainly I think cooperate in terms of trying to mitigate the spread of the virus further."

Professor John Wong, a senior adviser at the National University Health System, said the world has to remain united and pool collective expertise to tackle what is a global health, economic, social and geopolitical crisis.

He added: "Perhaps our greatest gift to our children and grandchildren is to learn from this and do everything to prevent the next pandemic."

Salma Khalik