

Health authorities looking at vaccination passports

Panellists at webinar on border control touch on a risk assessment system to guide nations

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A global accreditation framework for Covid-19 "vaccination passports" to allow for international travel is something that several health authorities, including Singapore's, are looking at.

However, this will require a lot more study, given how new the coronavirus is. Questions that need further discussion include the nature of the vaccine, how long immunity would last and if this will apply to recovered individuals.

Currently, the only vaccination certificate applicable for global travel is for yellow fever. The vaccination provides lifelong immunity.

This subject of vaccination passports was among a slew of issues discussed on Wednesday at a webinar titled Covid-19 In Asia Pacific – Border Control Policy And The Path To Reopening.

Organised by the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, the webinar convened a panel of seven speakers from around the region. They included Swiss Ambassador to Singapore Fabrice Filliez and the World Health Organisation's South-east Asia regional adviser Manisha Shridhar, as well as representatives from New Zealand, Indonesia and Singapore.

Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health dean Teo Yik Ying was the moderator.

A key topic of discussion was how strictly a country should control its borders and how the impact of imported cases on healthcare resources could be managed. To this, the panellists said there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Currently, many countries, including Singapore, adopt quarantine measures – the safest and most effective way to detect imported cases. However, given the economic fallout from the strict control of borders globally, countries have sought to take a calibrated approach to easing restrictions.

Risk assessments need to be carried out, and the panel touched on whether there would be a risk assessment framework to guide countries, regions and the world.

Such a framework would provide a very transparent way to make decisions, with clear indicators of when a country can lift border control measures and the extent of relaxation of safety restrictions.

The key measures that will form the cornerstone during the easing of border control measures include testing: pre-departure testing, testing on arrival, as well as repeated testing.

The panellists said decisions will also have to be made on what kind of tests need to be done – whether to use the gold-standard polymerase chain reaction test, or if countries could tap more advanced technologies, such as breath-analysing tests and rapid antigen tests.

In Singapore, a breathalyser-type diagnostic test kit for Covid-19 that provides results in under a minute is being developed. Now at the prototype stage, the test kit has so far achieved an accuracy rate of more than 90 per cent during a pilot clinical trial involving 180 patients at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases.

Antigen rapid tests are also being piloted in Singapore, where participants at certain mass events have to obtain a negative result before they can gain entry. Results of these tests are out within 30 minutes, and tests can be conducted at the event venue or at an off-site testing facility.

However, it is critical to note that none of these regimes is foolproof, and safe management measures as well as good contact tracing systems will remain critical in preventing infected cases who have entered the country from spreading the virus within the community, the panellists said.

Robust public health strategies will also boost people's confidence when travelling, the panel noted.