

Coronavirus: Fighting Covid-19

Public health v economy a false choice: WHO chief

He cites Singapore, NZ among nations that curbed outbreaks by focusing on four key priorities

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The head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) has debunked arguments that countries have to choose between public health and the economy when they look at whether to ease restrictions following a lockdown.

“That is a false choice,” said

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Instead, the WHO urges countries to focus on four essential priorities:

- Prevent Covid-19 amplifying events: All around the world, explosive outbreaks have been linked to gatherings, in places like stadiums, nightclubs and places of worship.
- Protect the vulnerable to save lives and reduce the burden on the health systems in terms of severely and critically ill patients.
- Educate and empower communities to protect themselves and others. Physical distancing, hand hygiene,

respiratory etiquette and masks can help to curb transmission and save lives. Not when done in isolation, but by practising all the measures together.

- Persist with the public health basics. Find, isolate, test and care for people who have been infected, and trace and quarantine their contacts.

Dr Tedros said there are many countries that have “effectively prevented or controlled their outbreaks by doing these four things and doing them well”, and named Singapore and New Zealand as two such places.

He was speaking at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine’s final

Covid-19 webinar yesterday, which looked at global solidarity. The session featured 16 speakers.

Dr Tedros said the pandemic has changed the world. “Lives and livelihoods have been lost, and economies and societies have been upended. The pandemic has exposed and exploited political fault lines and inequalities and the gaps in national health systems.”

But on a more positive note, he said for everything Covid-19 has taken from us, it has also given us something – a reminder of what really matters and the opportunity to forge a common future.

The real question is whether countries can come together in solidarity

to share the fruits of research when a viable vaccine is available.

“Or, will misguided nationalism reinforce the inequalities and injustices that have blighted our world for so long?” he asked. “In our inter-connected world, if people in low- and middle-income countries miss out on vaccines, the virus will continue to kill and the economic recovery, globally, will be delayed.”

Dr Tedros said: “The virus thrives on division. But united, we can defeat it. The pandemic has reminded us of a simple truth – that for all our differences, we are one human race and we are stronger together.”

In April, the WHO, together with the European Commission and France, set up the Covax initiative to provide equitable access to vaccines against Covid-19. More than 170 countries including Singapore have since joined. They will be guaranteed access to the world’s largest portfolio of vaccine candidates.

Dr Tedros said: “The first vaccine to be approved may not be the best. The more shots on goal we have, the higher the chances of having a very safe, very efficacious vaccine.”

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