Worst community outbreak in nearly a year a reminder to stay vigilant: Experts

It can be brought under control soon if people take care and safety protocols are as effective as before.

Clara Cheng

Singapore is experiencing its worst spike of Covid-19 community infections in nearly a year. It’s a grim reminder of how the virus situation can flare up without warning.

But if contact tracing, testing, and quarantine protocols are as effective as before, and people do not let their guard down, the current situation could be brought under control within the next week or so, experts said.

“The Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) cluster – now numbering 27 – is the nation’s first hospital cluster, and comprises staff and patients. One patient, a 69-year-old woman, had died. The recent cases show that nobody can relax, even for a moment,” stressed Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Tan Tock Seng School of Public Health.

“We have seen time and again how countries have had to ramp up restrictions, or even reimpose another lockdown, after they have opened up, and this scenario could become a reality if we become complacent,” he warned.

“Epidemiologists would point out that the virus has evolved. It is still a big threat in our management of Covid-19, and it won’t progress on to much further community spread.”

The TTSH cluster – the largest of nine operational clusters to date – and the cluster which suffered at Changi Airport Terminal 3, which number eight people so far, show that the original index cases had gone on to become secondary and primary cases, Professor Teo pointed out.

“Meanwhile, the clusters could peter out soon if all steps are followed. If our contact tracing, testing and quarantine measures are as effective as before, we should see the current spike come under control within the next couple of weeks or so,” Prof Teo predicted.

Singapore has already moved to contain the spread of the virus, acting swiftly to rein the cases, testing aggressively and enforcing lockdowns in four TTSH clusters.

Professor Teo said, “What’s critical is the cooperation from the public. If you are requested to go for a swab test, please go for it. If you have travelled in the absence of absence, please let us know.

And everyone must continue with personal safe management measures such as mask wearing and social distancing.”

The numbers, while alarming, are not large enough to be called a new wave of community infections, noted Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

The number of community cases now is nowhere near the peak in early April last year, when more than 60 new locally transmitted infections were reported daily, he said.

“Everyone has been quite re-aligned with the rules, and this will be a good reality check for us.”

“It is also a reminder to those who have been pushed out of their vaccination to get vaccinated, as we cannot expect the community to remain virus-free forever.”

“I wouldn’t blame the clusters we’re seeing this week – they are problems we would get on top of, but they are not currently anywhere near the problem we faced in April 2020,” Prof Cook said, although he added that not all infections would be detected.

Prof Fook added that the learnings of the spread will become clearer only in the next few days as cases are detected.

But there is a good chance that the authorities will be able to break the chains of transmission, given the country’s robust contact tracing, vaccination and testing capability, which have been built up over more than a year, he said.

Singapore is in a better place than it was a year ago, with more than 2 per cent of the population vaccinated, better capabilities in testing, a high take-up rate of the AstraZeneca vaccine, and medical facilities reinforced to cope with some degree of surge,” Prof Yu said.

“While I expect there to be more community cases that will emerge that are not linked to the active clusters, the protocols that have worked should once again help keep its transmission,” the authorities have taken swift and stringent action to contain the outbreaks.

“For instance, following an Edgefield Secondary School student testing positive for the virus last Friday, the school will move to online-based learning from tomorrow (all Friday, and precautionary measures such as thorough cleaning and disinfecting of the school premises have been stepped up.

At TTSH, all 1,000 inpatients and 4,500 staff working in the wards have been tested as part of a mass screening exercise. The four wards involved in the spread are in lockdown.

Professor Dale Fisher, an infection diseases expert at the National University Hospital, said the new spike in cases is a test for Singapore, to gauge how it is managing the pandemic.

“We need to think less in terms of waves but more in terms of clusters and if we can manage these clusters, we’re advanced.”

This is because local cases are not streaming through the community, and the approach is about controlling the spread from those clusters and breaking transmission chains, Prof Fisher explained.

Singapore will have to see if it can shut down the clusters with minimal impact on the rest of society and without resorting to blunt tools like a nationwide lockdown, he said.

“If there are too many cases and uncontrolled spread, that is when the government is going to crack down. We are not there at the moment, but we must be vigilant,” Prof Fisher said.

“During the May Day rally on April 30, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong highlighted the need to rigorously clamp down on the clusters, and avoid going into another complete lockdown.”

“If we have to do another lockdown like last year’s Circuit Breaker, it would be a major setback for our people and our economic recovery. Let’s not make it happen,” PM Lee said in his televised address.

The authorities have learnt from last year’s experience that outbreaks from the virus against the virus, the invisible foe is also becoming more wily. The pandemic has morphed into a different creature compared with last year, with new strains of the virus adding layers of complexity to Singapore’s fight. The strains could prove to be more transmissible, harder to detect, and maybe able to evade the body’s immune system.

These variants include Britain’s B117 strain, the Brazilian P1 variant, South Africa’s B1351 and (in India), “double-mutant” variant, B1617.

Cases of reinfections and infections after people have been vaccinated have also surfaced in Singapore and abroad.

Though vaccines have been highly effective against these variants, to vaccine is 100 per cent effective, and breakthrough cases remain. More studies need to be done to determine the risk of infection after vaccination and how long vaccine antibodies remain in the immune system, say scientists.

Prof Teo pointed out, “We need to understand whether the current community clusters are due to the variant, or if they are due to people becoming complacent and failing to stick to the protocols.”

The authorities are reacting very rapidly if we let our guard down. We need to keep to the spirit of the rules, which have been shown to work, to get through this,” Prof Teo said.