

# ‘Vaccines helped avoid second circuit breaker’

Experts also say home-based learning can't go on for long, students should be vaccinated

✔ **CLARACHONG**

Vaccinations are a more sustainable way of protecting the population, though the current slew of Covid-19 curbs – while fairly aggressive – are necessary, experts said.

It is gratifying that the nation stopped short of a circuit breaker, which will otherwise signify that Singapore can no longer control the virus' spread, Professor Dale Fisher, an infectious disease expert from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, said on Tuesday.

“But I believe we would have a circuit breaker in place if there was no vaccine,” said Prof Fisher, who is also chair of the World Health Organisation's Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network.

He added that Singapore's moderately high vaccination rate of over 30 per cent of the population, which includes those who have received their first jab, is a game changer in helping the nation avoid another circuit breaker.

The speed at which clusters have grown, such as the largest one in Changi Airport – which has bal-

looned to more than 80 cases over just two weeks – coupled with more unlinked cases and the growing number of active clusters, are some of Singapore's worrying Covid-19 trends.

But re-entering a circuit breaker – which would bar intermingling between different households – would mean a significant stepping on the brakes to give the authorities time to understand what is happening in the community, and allow space for healthcare facilities to recuperate and reduce their load, Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of NUS' Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said at a webinar.

The webinar, organised by the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, was hosted by Associate Professor David Allen. It also featured Dr Louisa Sun, an associate consultant with the infectious diseases team at National University Hospital and Alexandra Hospital, and Associate Professor Hsu Li Yang, vice-dean of global health at Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

The experts took a deeper look at current restrictions – such as the complete shift to home-based learning (HBL) in schools – which have

been disruptive.

HBL was done as a precautionary measure, given that the B1617 variant is more likely to infect children.

Prof Teo said HBL is not a long-term strategy. Instead, vaccination of children – those aged 12 to 15 can now get the Pfizer-BioNTech shot in Singapore – will be a more sustainable way of protecting them in the long run.

“HBL is just a way for us to tap the brakes, learn a bit more about the chains of transmission that are happening in schools, but it is not going to be a long-term strategy,” Prof Teo said.

When asked if Singapore should adopt a zero-tolerance approach to Covid-19 or learn to live with the virus as an endemic pathogen, the panel felt the endpoint of this pandemic will realistically see Sars-CoV-2 becoming an endemic disease.

“We are going to need high levels of vaccination which will reduce Covid-19 to a fairly mild disease that can circulate around,” Prof Fisher said.

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