

Scheme to train ‘ambassadors’ to tackle misinformation on vaccines

Audrey Tan

A public health ambassador programme was launched yesterday to train people to raise awareness of the importance of getting Covid-19 jabs.

The initiative by international service organisation Rotary Club of Singapore (RCS) and the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) Saw Swee Hock School of

Public Health was launched at a public forum to address vaccine hesitancy.

Minister of State for Culture, Community and Youth and Trade and Industry Low Yen Ling, who was the guest of honour at the virtual event, said: “Wrong and misleading information sows suspicion and confusion, and prevents people from protecting themselves and their loved ones from infection.”

“It is crucial to verify that the information received comes from

trusted and legitimate sources before sharing them,” she told the forum organised by the NUS school, with support from RCS.

About 4.2 million Covid-19 vaccine doses have been administered here so far, with almost 2.4 million people having received at least one shot, she noted. Students aged 12 and above are now eligible for the vaccine.

At the hour-long forum attended by more than 300 people, NUS infectious diseases physician Hsu Li

Yang gave an overview on technologies used to develop vaccines, and how those approved for use have shown to be effective in preventing hospitalisations and deaths.

His colleague Hannah Clapham, an assistant professor at the NUS school, said higher inoculation take-up rates will curb outbreaks of severe infection.

The two experts, and Associate Professor Steven Ooi, a senior consultant at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, fielded questions.

Responding to a query on whether there could be long-term side effects from messenger RNA (mRNA) vaccines such as the ones from Pfizer and Moderna, Prof Ooi said: “The experience of vaccinology has shown that even if there was going to be long-term side ef-

fects, these will show up very early on in a few months of the vaccine administration. We have not seen any evidence of this thus far.”

Prior to the pandemic, no mRNA vaccines had been approved for use. Prof Ooi added: “I think we are moving very cautiously as a country, (monitoring) the science that can (help) us with decision-making processes (amid) the uncertainty.”

Associate Professor Hsu said initiatives like the RCS ambassador programme were useful in tackling misinformation. “For many members of the public, experts are people who are quite removed from who they are and what they do... They are better able to relate to people who are close to them and their friends,” he noted.

Some 150 participants from partner organisations of the RCS took

part in the programme’s first training workshop – conducted by the NUS public health experts – after the forum.

Details of community outreach programmes are still being finalised due to the fluidity of the Covid-19 situation here.

Singapore Management University undergraduate Nicole Ng, 21, from the Rotaract Club of Bukit Gombak, said it was important for ambassadors to understand the perspectives of those who may be more hesitant to get the vaccine.

She added that “we are looking to the professionals from the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, as well as the Rotarians (Rotary Club members), to train us on our advocacy skills”.

audreyt@sph.com.sg