Source: *The Straits Times,* pA4
Date: 14 February 2025

Infectious diseases agency to be set up on April 1

NCID chief to lead stat board that will safeguard country from disease threats

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The Communicable Diseases Agency (CDA) will be set up as a statutory board on April 1 to consolidate the public health functions that detect, prevent and control infectious diseases.

Leading the agency will be the current executive director of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), Professor Vernon Lee. He will step down from NCID and become CDA's chief executive officer on April 1.

In a statement on Feb 13, the Ministry of Health (MOH) said CDA will allow the Government to respond quickly to disease outbreaks as one concerted public health effort, and "play a vital role in safeguarding Singapore from infectious disease threats".

Currently, these efforts are spread between MOH, the Health Promotion Board and NCID.

The formation of the CDA marks a significant step in Singapore's efforts to strengthen its capabilities in infectious disease management and public health preparedness.

Following the release of a White Paper on Singapore's response to Covid-19 in March 2023, then Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong told Parliament that the country would set up a dedicated centre for public health to consolidate its disease control and pandemic management capabilities.

A new Bill setting out the legislative framework for the agency was passed on Jan 7, 2025.

The CDA will focus on five key areas:

- prevent the spread of diseases through public education, vaccination policies, as well as infection prevention and control measures;
- lead and coordinate efforts to strengthen public health preparedness against infectious diseases, as well as develop vaccines and provide access to therapeutics;
- strengthen surveillance capabilities, and explore the use of artificial intelligence and data analytics to crunch large volumes of data;
- investigate and respond to cases and outbreaks of infectious diseases, provide policy and scientific recommendations, and implement public health and social measures during a pandemic; and
- conduct and coordinate public health research, which it will use to make policies.

It will also work with international partners to keep abreast of developments, share best practices and enact swift responses to evolving disease situations worldwide.

Prof Lee, 47, has more than two decades of experience in public health policy and infectious disease management. The adjunct professor at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health has extensive global health experience in pandemic preparedness and response, infectious disease epidemiology, as well as health policy and management.

He played an instrumental role in the country's response to Covid-19 in advising a multi-ministry task force, and designing and implementing national policies on preparedness and risk management.

Prof Lee was also involved in Singapore's response to other outbreaks, including the 2009 influenza pandemic, Zika, tuberculosis and the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in 2003.

He was seconded twice to the World Health Organisation – to the Indonesia office from 2007 to 2008, and the headquarters in Geneva from 2010 to 2012 where he worked on local, regional and global disease preparedness and response initiatives.

"CDA will play a key role in protecting Singapore from infectious diseases threats," Prof Lee told The Straits Times.

"I look forward to working with my team, as well as strengthening collaborations with local and international partners, to enable a swift response to current and future infectious diseases."

NCID said that, with the formation of CDA, the centre will focus on its core mission in clinical care and outbreak preparedness, better reflecting its evolving role.

It said: "The National Healthcare Group will further integrate NCID's clinical services and its associated functions with Tan Tock Seng Hospital. NCID will function as a clinical Centre of Excellence for infectious diseases and one of the designated national facilities for outbreaks."

NCID's new executive director will be announced in due course.

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