

MEDIA RELEASE

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Strategies for the ‘New Normal’ Post-MCO

The Science Media Centre (SMC) Malaysia in collaboration with the Malaysian Health Coalition (MHC) hosted their first webinar on Saturday 25 April 2020 to discuss strategies for the ‘new normal’ once the movement control order (MCO) is lifted. The webinar was moderated by Tan Su Lin, co-founder of SMC Malaysia.

The panelists comprised of health, mental health and science communications experts analysed the key issues relating to the Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia. They were Senior Consultant Paediatrician, Datuk Dr Amar-Singh HSS; Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Associate Professor Dr Zubaidah Jamil Osman; and Dr Mahaletchumy Arujanan, Science Communication Expert and Co-founder of SMC Malaysia.

The panelists discussed many issues from the impact of long-term MCO on mental health to life after MCO and MCO exit strategies, as well as preparations for the new normal and the importance of effective science communication during the Covid-19 crisis.

Senior Consultant Paediatrician, Datuk Dr Amar-Singh HSS opined that Malaysia is not ready to exit the MCO due to many issues that still need to be addressed. He identified four weaknesses out of the six criteria outline by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for exiting the MCO. They are testing and screening, the capacity of the healthcare system, contact tracing, and most importantly, the mindset of the community to live under a new normal.

“I do not believe that the general public has fully grasped and adopted all the necessary preventative measures, such as physical distancing, to stop the spread of Covid-19. We cannot only have 50 per cent or 70 per cent of people who are compliant.”

“To stop the spread of this disease, according to the WHO, almost all of society must abide by these measures and take responsibility. I don’t think that the general public has fully understood this,” he said during the webinar.

He added that the 33 new cases of Covid-19 among patients of influenza-like illnesses (ILI) and severe acute respiratory infections (SARI) in the last two weeks show that the virus is still spreading within the community.

“What we have yet to understand is that although the spread is under control, people are still being infected, which means that the virus is still spreading from one person to another in our society.”

“What will happen if we are not careful is the virus will continue to spread and there will be an even larger second and third wave,” he said.

Datuk Dr Amar is also the former Head of the Paediatric Department at Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun, Ipoh and recently co-wrote standard operating procedure (SOP) guidelines for schools and childcare centres for the post-MCO period.

These guidelines produced by the National Early Childhood Intervention Centre highlight the need to train teachers and parents on preventative measures which include physical distancing of students in the classroom and in schools.

“I cannot imagine 40 students sitting in a classroom with one teacher. That is very dangerous.”

“It is unlikely that the disease will be fatal for children nor will they fall severely ill, but they could carry the infection to their parents and grandparents,” he said.

Meanwhile, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Associate Professor Dr Zubaidah Jamil Osman urged people to mentally prepare for and accept the new normal which includes continuing habits of physical distancing and staying at home.

“Physical distancing is the new norm post-MCO. It is important that this is distinguished from social distancing. Stay in touch with your loved ones, friends and community members through social media and technology.”

“People will always respond and follow when they see the benefit of their actions. So, we must view these preventative measures as a social responsibility to protect ourselves and others.”

“It may feel difficult in the beginning because it is not something we are used to, but we must condition ourselves and teach ourselves to get used to it,” she said while explaining that feeling anxious is also part of the new norm.

“A little anxiety is not a bad thing because it will motivate people to wash their hands, wear masks and abide by physical distancing,” she added.

Dr Mahaletchumy Arujanan, Science Communications Expert asserted that strategies for exiting the MCO must be communicated clearly to ensure that people understand the consequences if new norms of behaviour are not observed.

“General awareness and understanding of scientific issues in our society is low. During the height of this pandemic, many people still do not understand the risk of infection as we can see that many people are still leaving their homes and breaking MCO rules. Without a real exit strategy, many will think that the virus is gone once the MCO is lifted.”

“I am worried that when the MCO exit strategy is announced, the public perception will be that the pandemic is over and that there is no more virus. This is simply not true. The virus will not disappear just like that and there is no guarantee that it will not return. So, an effective science communications strategy will be crucial. I hope that the Ministry of Health plans a clear communications strategy before announcing any lifting of MCO restrictions,” she said.

She also emphasised that investment in long-term research and development is required for vaccine research as it may take a long time.

Watch the full webinar here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oco39mPbfcE>

NECIC’s guidelines for schools and childcare centres for the post-MCO period here: <http://www.necicmalaysia.org/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=6&action=view&retrieveid=118>

About Us

Science Media Centre Malaysia

Science Media Centre (SMC) Malaysia adalah platform maya bagi menyalurkan maklumat berdasarkan bukti dan fakta sains bagi menyokong liputan media berkenaan isu-isu sains yang kompleks, terutamanya ketika ini yang tengah hangat diperkatakan, Covid-19. SMC Malaysia merupakan salah satu jaringan antarabangsa Pusat Sains Media (SMC) yang ditubuhkan di seluruh dunia termasuk UK, New Zealand, Australia, Jerman dan Kanada.

Malaysian Health Coalition (MHC)

The Malaysian Health Coalition (MHC) is an apolitical coalition of over 40 health professional organisations and individuals. It was founded to unite healthcare professionals, strengthen the Malaysian health system and improve the health of all Malaysians, especially during the Covid-19 crisis. You may find the MHC’s advice on their Facebook page or on their website at www.myhealthcoalition.org

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