

AKHBAR : BERITA HARIAN

MUKA SURAT : 14

RUANGAN : NASIONAL

Penularan COVID-19



Muhammad Huzaimi (dua dari kiri) menerima cenderahati daripada Dr Gim Sian pada Majlis Penutupan Hospital Medan ATM di Hospital Pulau Pinang, semalam. (Foto Mikail Ong/BH)

Semua hospital medan ATM ditutup

Operasi bantuan ditamatkan hasil keberkesanan langkah mitigasi, program vaksin

Oleh Zuhainy Zulkiffli
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Georgetown: Semua 10 hospital medan Angkatan Tentera Malaysia (ATM) yang dibuka di beberapa negeri bagi merawat pesakit COVID-19, ditamatkan operasi susulan kejayaan dan keberkesanan langkah mitigasi serta program vaksin dalam kalangan masyarakat.

Semalam, tiga hospital medan ATM di Pulau Pinang dan Johor

menjadi yang terakhir ditutup, susulan penurunan kes COVID-19.

Panglima Divisyen Kedua Infantri Malaysia (2 Divisyen), Mejar Jeneral Datuk Muhammad Huzaimi Sabri, berkata dua hospital medan di Pulau Pinang yang terakhir ditutup ialah Hospital Medan ATM Pulau Pinang di Hospital Pulau Pinang (HPP) dan ICU Hospital Medan ATM Kepala Batas, selain Hospital Medan ATM di Hospital Sultanah Aminah Johor Bahru.

Katanya, Hospital Medan ATM Kepala Batas beroperasi selama 216 hari selepas dibina pada 28 Mei, manakala Hospital Medan ATM HPP yang dibuka pada 24 September lalu beroperasi selama 97 hari.

"Terdapat tiga hospital medan ATM di Malaysia yang terakhir ditutup hari ini (semalam), iaitu

dua di Pulau Pinang dan sebuah di Johor.

"Ia susulan penurunan kes yang ketara hasil kejayaan dan keberkesanan langkah mitigasi serta program vaksin dalam kalangan masyarakat," katanya kepada media selepas Majlis Simbolik Penutupan Hospital Medan ATM Pulau Pinang di HPP, di sini semalam.

Yang turut hadir, Pengarah HPP, Datuk Dr Teo Gim Sian.

Pada masa sama, Muhammad Huzaimi berkata, ATM bersedia membina semula hospital medan di negeri ini sekiranya perlu, susulan kes jangkitan baharu COVID-19 membabitkan varian Omicron.

"Jika diarahkan pihak atasan bagi membina (hospital medan), kita sudah bersedia. Setakat ini, belum ada arahan, tetapi kita akan bergerak sekiranya diperlukan," katanya.

3,683 kes baharu, 97.6 peratus dewasa lengkap vaksinasi

Putrajaya: Sebanyak 3,683 kes jangkitan COVID-19 direkodkan setakat jam 12 tengah hari semalam.

Ketua Pengarah Kesihatan, Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, berkata pertambahan kes penularan itu menjadikan angka jangkitan COVID-19 di Malaysia meningkat kepada 2,750,516 individu.

Sebanyak 22,846,708 individu atau 97.6 peratus populasi dewasa di negara ini sudah lengkap menerima suntikan vaksin COVID-19 setakat semalam.

Berdasarkan data Kementerian Kesihatan (KKM) melalui laman COVIDNOW, sebanyak 23,142,519 individu atau 98.9 peratus daripada golongan itu menerima seku-

rang-kurangnya satu dos vaksin.

Bagi populasi remaja berusia 12 hingga 17 tahun pula, sejumlah 87.4 peratus atau 2,749,975 sudah melengkapkan vaksinasi, manakala 2,843,040 atau 90.4 peratus menerima sekurang-kurangnya satu dos vaksin COVID-19.

Sejumlah 153,228 dos vaksin sudah diberikan membabitkan 145,179 dos penggalak, dengan 4,653 dos kedua dan 3,396 dos pertama.

Perkembangan itu menjadikan jumlah kumulatif pemberian vaksin menerusi Program Imunisasi COVID-19 Kebangsaan (PICK) meningkat kepada 57,112,114 dengan 5,727,151 daripadanya adalah dos penggalak.

Penerima vaksin Pfizer, AZ terima dos penggalak

Butterworth: Pusat Pemberian Vaksin (PPV) Offsite di Tapak Ekspo Seberang Jaya, di sini mula dikunjungi penerima vaksin jenis Pfizer dan AstraZeneca (AZ) yang mahu mendapatkan suntikan dos penggalak vaksin COVID-19.

Ia berikutan selepas mereka mendengar pengumuman Kementerian Kesihatan (KKM) berhubung sela masa jenis vaksin tersebut yang dipendekkan kepada tiga bulan berbanding enam bulan sebelum ini.

Mohd Nizal Ismail, 48, yang mendapatkan suntikan kedua vaksin jenis AstraZeneca pada 6 September lalu, tidak melepaskan peluang apabila membawa isterinya, Rusmiza Ishak, 48 dan anak perempuannya, Nur Faa-

tiyah, 21 bagi mendapatkan suntikan dos penggalak.

"Saya memang nak sangat dapatkan dos penggalak kerana saya mahu menunaikan umrah pada 15 Januari ini yang mana saya bimbang jika secara tiba-tiba Arab Saudi hanya bawakan jemaah yang mendapatkan dos penggalak sahaja," katanya.

Foo Kean Loon, 41, pula berkata beliau mahu segera mendapatkan suntikan dos penggalak kerana kerap ke luar negara bagi urusan kerja.

"Saya mendapatkan suntikan dos kedua vaksin Pfizer pada 4 September lalu dan memang nak sangat dapatkan dos penggalak memandangkan kerja saya yang kerap ke luar negara.



Mohd Nizal mendapatkan suntikan dos penggalak di PPV Offsite Tapak Ekspo Seberang Jaya, semalam. (Foto Danial Saad/BH)

"Ada negara sekarang hanya buka kepada individu yang mendapatkan suntikan dos penggalak dan itu menyebabkan saya

perlu bersedia," katanya.

Juruteknik swasta, Mohd Azam Ahmad, 41, berkata dia yang menerima suntikan kedua Pfizer

pada 23 Ogos lalu teruja selepas mendapat tahu mengenai sela masa vaksin Pfizer dan AstraZeneca dipendekkan kepada tiga bulan.

"Saya nak sangat dapatkan dos penggalak selepas kedatangan varian Omicron yang membimbangkan.

Sementara itu, Mufti Pahang, Datuk Seri Abdul Rahman Osman, berkata jemaah umrah dan mereka yang pulang mengerjakan ibadah berkenaan dinasihatkan patuh dengan arahan pihak berkuasa berhubung pemuatan prosedur operasi standard (SOP).

Beliau berkata, hakikatnya di dalam Islam, mentaati ulil amri (kerajaan atau pihak berkuasa) yang memerintah sebuah negara adalah wajib.

AKHBAR : HARIAN METRO

MUKA SURAT : 6

RUANGAN : LOKAL

22,846,708 dewasa lengkap divaksin

Kuala Lumpur: Seramai 22,846,708 individu atau 97.6 peratus populasi dewasa di negara ini lengkap menerima suntikan vaksin Covid-19, setakat kelmarin.

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AKHBAR : SINAR HARIAN
MUKA SURAT : 13
RUANGAN : NASIONAL

Kes positif Covid-19 meningkat, sebanyak 3,683 kes direkodkan pada Rabu

DR NOOR
HISHAM



SHAH ALAM - Kes harian positif Covid-19 negara kembali mencatatkan peningkatan dengan 3,683 kes positif Covid-19 pada Rabu berbanding 2,897 kes pada Selasa.

Ketua Pengarah Kesihatan, Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah berkata, pertambahan itu bermakna jumlah kumulatif kes Covid-19

negara kini ialah 2,750,516 kes.

"Kes harian itu melibatkan 3,444 kes tempatan yang merekodkan 3,325 warganegara dan 119 bukan warganegara.

"Sementara itu, sebanyak 239 kes import pula melibatkan 219 warganegara dan 20 bukan warganegara," katanya dalam satu kenyataan pada Rabu.

Beliau berkata, daripada 3,683 kes baharu yang dilaporkan, sebanyak 56 kes merupakan kategori tiga, empat dan lima, manakala 3,627 kes bagi kategori satu dan dua.

Sementara itu, Dr Noor Hisham berkata, bagi kes sembuh pula, sebanyak 4,322 kes dicatatkan menjadikan kumulatif pesakit pulih ialah 2,677,406 kes.

Beliau berkata, sebanyak 288 kes dirawat di unit rawatan rapi (ICU) dengan 162 daripadanya memerlukan bantuan pernafasan.

**MENDEPANI KRISIS
COVID-19:
APA TINDAKAN
KITA?**

Menurutnya, enam kluster baharu dikesan menjadikan jumlah yang masih aktif ialah 227 kluster, manakala kadar kebolehsangkitan

(Rt) di negara ini adalah 0.93 setakat Rabu.

"Sehingga jam 3 petang Rabu, tiada kes baharu dilaporkan dalam kalangan mangsa banjir yang menjadikan jumlah keseluruhan adalah kekal 434 kes," kata beliau.

AKHBAR : NEW STRAITS TIMES

MUKA SURAT : 6

RUANGAN : NEWS / NATION

HIGHEST INFECTIVITY RATE IN TERENGGANU

DAILY CASES PASS 3,000 MARK

3,683 new infections recorded yesterday, after cases dipped below 3,000 for 3 days

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DAILY Covid-19 cases climbed to 3,683 yesterday after remaining below the 3,000 mark for three days.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said the cumulative coronavirus cases now stood at 2,750,516.

On the national infectivity rate, the Rt value stayed at 0.93 on Tuesday.

Based on data updated by Dr Noor Hisham, Terengganu remained as the state with the highest Rt at 1.00, followed by Johor (0.95) and Perak (0.94).

Kedah's Rt was at 0.93, Penang and Putrajaya (0.92), Selangor and Kelantan (0.91), Negri Sembilan (0.90), Melaka and Kuala Lumpur (0.89), Pahang and Perlis (0.87), Sabah (0.85), Labuan (0.73), and Sarawak (0.71).

On Tuesday, Malaysia reported



People waiting to get booster shots in Seberang Jaya yesterday. PIC BY DANIAL SAAD

23 Covid-19 deaths, raising the national toll to 31,392.

From the 23 deaths, Johor and Terengganu each recorded four deaths, Perak (three), Kelantan, Pahang, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur (two each), as well as one each in Kedah, Melaka, Negri Sembilan and Sabah.

Of the number, four were brought-in-dead cases — two in Kuala Lumpur and one each in Johor and Kelantan.

On Tuesday noon, four new clusters were identified, namely a high-risk group cluster, Bandar Satelit Pasir Tumboh, in Kota Baru and Machang, Kelantan; an

education cluster, Jalan Gelu, in Jelebu, Negri Sembilan; a community cluster, Dua Jalan Bagan Sungai Burong, in Sabak Bernam, Selangor, and an import cluster, Jengka 25 Saudi, in Temerloh, Pahang.

Sixty-five per cent of hospital beds in the country are currently

used for Covid-19 cases.

The hospital bed utilisation rates in Melaka and Kelantan climbed above 80 per cent, at 83.3 per cent and 81.3 per cent, respectively.

States that continued to have a utilisation rate above 70 per cent are Terengganu (77.7 per cent), Kedah (77 per cent) and Johor (72.1 per cent).

Hospital bed utilisation in Kedah increased by 21 per cent compared with eight days ago. Also on the rise were Melaka (20 per cent), Putrajaya (18 per cent), Sarawak (11 per cent), Kelantan (seven per cent) and Johor (five per cent).

Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds were 55.2 per cent occupied, with 302 active cases.

Currently, there are 42,357 active cases, with 35,247 observing home quarantine, 3,303 at Covid-19 quarantine and treatment centres, 3,505 hospitalised and 302 at the ICU where 169 of them require breathing assistance.

To date, 17.5 per cent (5,727,151 individuals) of the total population have received booster shots.

The fully vaccinated percentage has increased to 78.4 per cent (25,596,683 individuals), comprising 22,846,708 adults and 2,749,975 adolescents.

On Tuesday, 153,228 vaccine doses were administered, including 145,179 booster shots.

Pfizer and AstraZeneca jab recipients

'Booster shots give better protection'

BUTTERWORTH: Recipients of Pfizer BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines started thronging the offsite Covid-19 vaccination centre (PPV) at the Seberang Jaya Expo Site here yesterday for their booster shots.

This comes after the Health Ministry shortened the interval period for recipients of Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines to three months from six months previously.

Checks by the *New Straits Times* at the PPV yesterday morning found 50 people queuing up for their booster shots.

Among them were Mohd Nizal Ismail, 48, Foo Kean Loon, 41, and Mohd Adzam Ahmad, 41.

Mohd Nizal, who received his second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine on Sept 6, also brought along his wife, Rasmiza Ishak, 48, and their daughter, Nur Faatihah,

21, to get their booster shots.

He said he decided to take his wife and daughter for the booster shots following the Health Ministry's announcement on Tuesday.

"I have been looking forward to get the booster shot because I plan to perform *umrah* on Jan 15. I am worried if Saudi Arabia only allows pilgrims who have received their booster shots to perform *umrah*."

"Although I know Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines are accepted, but it is better for me to be prepared."

"Moreover, with several Omicron variant cases from Saudi Arabia, the booster shot is much needed for better protection."

Foo said he wanted to immediately get the booster shot as he travelled frequently for work.

"I got my second dose of the

Pfizer vaccine on Sept 4 and really wanted to get the booster shot as I often fly overseas for work."

"Some countries are open only to individuals who get their booster shots and I need to be fully prepared."

Mohd Adzam, a technician, who received his second dose of the Pfizer vaccine on Aug 23, said he was excited after learning that the interval for Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccine recipients had been shortened to three months.

"With the new Omicron variant, the situation is worrying."

"I really want to get the booster shot."

"Let people say whatever they want about booster shots. I don't believe in rumours. Now, it is better to protect ourselves," he said.

On Tuesday, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said the



Mohd Nizal Ismail receiving a booster shot at an offsite Covid-19 vaccination centre in Seberang Jaya yesterday. PIC BY DANIAL SAAD

working committee for booster shots had recommended all individuals aged 18 and above to receive their booster shots three months after receiving their second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine.

He had said that priority would be given to the high-risk group, such as those with comorbidities,

adding that booster shots would be given in an age de-escalation approach.

Khairy also added that the ministry would increase the booster recipient capacity as majority of the adult population would be eligible to get the booster shots in January and February.

AKHBAR : THE STAR
MUKA SURAT : 8
RUANGAN : NATION

'Shorter interval is necessary'

Experts: Speeding up booster process will help in fight against new variants

By LIEW JIA XIAN
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PETALING JAYA: As the virus evolves, steps needed to keep people safe must too, including adjusting the interval of booster shots, experts say.

Many countries have shortened the interval of Covid-19 booster shots to three months, including Malaysia, in the fight to contain new coronavirus variants, especially Omicron.

Virologist Dr Kumitaa Theva Das said global data suggests that two doses of vaccine, whether it is from Pfizer, AstraZeneca or Sinovac, offer reduced protection against Omicron, adding that immunity too wanes faster against Omicron compared with the Delta strain.

"Based on an interim statement published by WHO (the World Health Organisation) recently, all studies on Pfizer and AstraZeneca show a strong immune response and increase in antibody levels following booster shots, and that both homologous and heterologous (mix and match) regimens are immunologically effective."

"According to the same statement, all of the boosters have shown to be equally safe as the two doses administered so far."

"AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Sinovac are different types of vaccines, but all boosters increase antibodies and provide overall immune protection," she added.

After being vaccinated, some side effects are normal and expected, said Kumitaa, adding that it is a sign that the body is building protection, regardless of the vaccine type.

Similar to the two vaccine doses, recipients will be required to stay in an observation bay for 15 to 30 minutes to ensure that there are no severe side effects, she said.

"Being in the observation bay



For safety: Dr Fatim Nabila Ahmad Tajuddin from Klinik Metro Taman Ikan Emas, Cheras, preparing to give a patient a vaccination shot.
— SAMUEL ONG/The Star

means qualified help is on hand in the unlikely event that you do experience any (side effects)."

"Some people may develop fever, muscle pain and swelling, redness or pain at the injection site for one to two days. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids and get plenty of rest."

"It is also important to continue protecting yourself after your booster shot by washing your hands often, physical distancing, wearing a well-fitted mask, and being in a well-ventilated place."

"If your symptoms are severe or last longer than a week, do reach out to medical frontliners," she said. Universiti Putra Malaysia medical epidemiologist Assoc Prof Dr Malina Osman said the shortened interval will also help speed up the process, allowing more to get their booster shot.

"Based on published studies, the booster shot can protect the public from new variants."

"There should not be any prob-

lem related to safety to take the booster shot earlier than the recommended period of 180 days for Pfizer and AstraZeneca."

"There are studies done in the lab as well as clinical trials indicating the waning of antibodies after a few months of completing two doses of the vaccines."

"The main issue WHO is concerned with is vaccine inequity," she said, adding that this can be overcome by each country's own initiatives.

According to published data, the side effects from booster shots are not due to the interval being shortened, Dr Malina said.

"Similar to previous doses, vaccine recipients should look for the listed side effects, make a report if they get any and get treatment if they do."

"Do not do any heavy physical activities that may burden the heart for at least four days," she said.

On Tuesday, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin said Pfizer and

AstraZeneca vaccine booster shots can be given at least three months after the second dose.

The move to shorten the interval is similar to measures taken by other countries such as Germany and Australia, which are recommending shorter intervals in an attempt to stop the spread of new variants.

Khairy added that all seniors aged 60 and above and adults who have received both doses of their vaccines (Pfizer and AstraZeneca) are highly recommended to get their booster vaccine at least three months after receiving the primary vaccine.

"Individuals with comorbidities, residents and staff at healthcare centres will be given priority to receive the booster shots."

"We will be using the age de-escalation approach for those who are 18 years old and above and have received two doses of their jabs, starting from 50 years and above, 40 years and above, and subse-

quently 18 years and above."

"Adults will receive their booster shots in January and February next year and we will increase the capacity by opening more PPV and private clinics," said Khairy, adding that Sinovac booster shots will only be given to those who are contraindicated against Pfizer or AstraZeneca.

Universiti Sains Malaysia virology scientist Dr Muhammad Amir Yunus also felt that cutting the gap from six to three months is one way to increase the rate of booster jabs.

"I understand that the challenge faced by the authorities now is that very few people seem keen on getting their booster shots."

"There are people who are fully vaccinated and are not keen on getting their booster shots, thinking that they already have the antibodies."

"Those who don't fully understand the importance of booster shots should be educated so they don't just follow the opinion of those who think that booster shots are not necessary."

"Some may be sceptical of heterologous boosters," he said, adding that they are relatively safe and offer more benefits than risks, especially as the pandemic is ongoing and travelling restrictions have been lifted.

Dr Muhammad Amir suggested that the government make it compulsory for people to receive their booster shots.

"Those who fail to get their booster jabs should be considered as unvaccinated."

"Perhaps the authorities could also offer incentives (not necessarily monetary) to boost the booster jabs rate?"

"This might prompt those sitting on the fence to get their booster jabs for their own good health," he added.

Most agree it is the right move by ministry

PETALING JAYA: Most people view the announcement by the Health Ministry to shorten the interval before receiving booster shots from six to three months as positive.

Assistant registrar Tan Sophine, 27, said she is ready to get her booster shot, adding that it is better to get it earlier than later to keep up the body's antibodies against the virus.

"Since the Omicron variant is spreading like wildfire, I want to get my booster shot as soon as possible to keep myself protected."

"Many countries such as Canada and Australia have also shortened the interval," she said.

Tan, who received her second shot of AstraZeneca four months ago, said she is not worried about the side effects of the vaccine.

"I believe I experienced the worst when I received my first dose."

"Since I have not received any appointments yet, I plan to go to the nearest clinic available to get my booster shot after the New Year celebration."

"I guess I will be sleeping late and

Closer and closer to vaxxed nation

KUALA LUMPUR: A total of 22,846,708 people or 97.6% of the adult population have completed their Covid-19 vaccination.

Based on the Health Ministry's CovidNow website, 23,142,519 people or 98.9% of the group have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

As for the adolescent population aged between 12 and 17, a total of 2,749,975 or 87.4% have completed their vaccination, while 2,843,040 or 90.4% have

received at least one dose of the vaccine.

A total of 153,228 doses of the vaccine were dispensed on Tuesday, of which 145,179 were booster doses, 4,653 were the second dose and 3,396 as the first dose.

This brings the cumulative number of vaccine doses administered under the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme to 57,112,144, including 5,727,151 booster doses. — Bernama

enjoying myself during this period, so it is better for me to get the shot after the celebration," she quipped.

It is the same for lawyer Kelvin Ho, 27, who also believes that the Health Ministry has made the right move in shortening the interval.

"Many countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have introduced shorter intervals for booster shots and it has proven to be effective."

"I have no concerns about the shortened interval. In fact, I am

keen to receive my booster shot and, similarly, have no worries about the side effects," he said.

Ho added that he has obtained both doses of Pfizer via the Kuala Lumpur Bar Committee's vaccination initiative.

"I am not sure about the current arrangements but I hope to get it as soon as possible."

"I don't mind putting my name on the waiting list at a clinic," he said.

Housewife R. Sareswary, 37, said

she too is ready to receive the booster shot to protect her family and children.

"As my children are going back to school soon and one of them has not been vaccinated, I want to get my booster jab as soon as possible to protect my seven-year-old daughter."

"I have been fully vaccinated since August and with the shortened interval, I may be able to receive my jab anytime now," she said.

Three imported Omicron cases

SEREMBAN: Three cases of the Omicron variant of Covid-19 were detected in Negri Sembilan on Tuesday, with all being imported cases involving three women who returned from abroad.

State health, environment, cooperatives and consumerism action committee chairman S. Veerapan said the first case involved a 28-year-old who arrived from Ireland through Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) on Dec 15.

The woman, who was asymptomatic and fully vaccinated, was screened at the KLIA entrance and made to wear a digital surveillance bracelet and put under home quarantine, he told Bernama yesterday.

The second case involved a 28-year-old woman who arrived from the United Kingdom on Dec 14.

The third victim, aged 29, tested positive during screening at KLIA on Dec 16 upon her return from the UK.

AKHBAR : THE STAR
MUKA SURAT : 10
RUANGAN : NATION

Expert: Don't bring unvaxxed children out of home

By LIEW JIA XIAN
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PETALING JAYA: Parents should not take their children who are unvaccinated out of home unnecessarily, says an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist.

Consultant ENT surgeon Datuk Dr Balwant Singh Gendeh also advised parents to avoid bringing their unvaccinated children along if they are on a business trip.

"Travel should be limited and unvaccinated children must not travel unnecessarily.

"As they are not vaccinated, there is a high chance of them getting infected by the virus, especially the Omicron variant that is fast spreading in the community," he said when contacted.

Dr Balwant Singh, who is Association of Specialists in Private Medical Practice of Malaysia president, said the United States Food and Drug Administration had recently authorised the emergency use of the Pfizer vaccine for the prevention of Covid-19 to include children between five and 11 years old.

"By vaccinating children, they will have antibodies against the disease. We strongly advise parents and grandparents to get their booster shots as soon as possible.

"Parents and grandparents who are outside most of the time might be carriers and are asymptomatic.

"They could bring it home to their children and grandchildren.

"It is very dangerous to these young kids as they do not have protection.

"If children have been vaccinated and were infected, they will likely only be in Category One and Two," he said.

One Omicron case was detected in an eight-year-old female Malaysian child who was living with her family in Lagos, Nigeria, and had reported a negative RT-PCR Covid-19 test result before departing for Malaysia.

The case was detected when the child, her younger sister and her mother had arrived in Malaysia on Dec 5 after transiting through Doha, Qatar, but reported a positive result on Dec 7.

New York City saw four-fold increase in Covid-19 hospital admissions for children under 18 since Dec 5.

It was reported that about half of the admissions were younger than five, an age group that is vaccine ineligible.

AKHBAR : THE SUN ON THURSDAY
MUKA SURAT : 4
RUANGAN : NEWS WITHOUT BORDERS

Time for **stricter** measures

► Expert calls for more focused efforts to stem rising number of Omicron cases coming in from abroad

■ BY **ASHIQIN ARIFFIN**
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PETALING JAYA: The increase in the number of Omicron infections has prompted health experts to call for tighter measures to curb its spread.

However, they conceded that additional information about the new variant would be essential to enable the authorities to introduce more focused measures.

Another three Omicron cases were reported yesterday in Negri Sembilan, raising the national tally to 65.

There has only been one case that was transmitted locally and it was detected in Sarawak.

University of Nottingham Malaysia associate dean and professor, virologist Dr Sandy H.S. Loh, said quarantine measures imposed in the country are inadequate.

"We have not done enough to prevent transmission of imported cases," she said, adding that those who arrived on international flights had breached quarantine requirements and as a result, the variant spread locally.

She called on the authorities to re-evaluate the situation and enhance the efficiency of laboratory assessments to hasten the identification of the variant, especially at entry points.

Loh pointed out that virologists had earlier feared the possibility of another variant of concern.

"Due to rapid mutations, it is really difficult for any country, even the United States and United Kingdom, to get well-prepared."

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai said the genomic sequencing process should be improved to enhance monitoring of the infection.

"Prevention is better than cure in controlling the spread of Omicron. It is key to ensuring that it does not gain a foothold in the country."

"If our people are disciplined and observe the standard operating procedures to the letter, we should be able to prevent a surge," he said.

Koh added that steps should be taken to be thorough in contact tracing, in line with the FTIS (find, test, trace, isolate and support) system.

"Early detection and isolation of Covid-19

cases will be key to the management of Omicron."

He also urged Malaysians to get their booster dose, adding that it could reduce the health risks associated with an infection.

"Those eligible for booster shots should get their jab as soon as possible as there is evidence that boosters will strengthen protection against the Omicron variant. This should be a priority."

Dr Muhammad Afiq Aziz of the Institute of Biological Sciences at Universiti Malaya said education is imperative in ensuring that everyone knew their responsibility in taking care of themselves and the community.

"The only way we can survive is to fully understand how this virus is transmitted. I can see that some people have yet to get the message."

Afiq said in the long run, the country would need to adapt to the changes and prepare for the worst by reviewing infrastructure to prevent transmissible diseases.

"A good ventilation system is important, especially now with more virulent variants. In the future, we must have buildings that meet these requirements because reports have shown that coronavirus can travel through a bad (venting) system," he added.

Experts agreed that quarantine should be confined to specific centres to eliminate the risk of violation of home quarantine, which leads to more infections.



Armed Forces officials applauding medical frontliners during a simple closing ceremony at Penang Hospital yesterday.
 — MASRY CHEANI/THESUN

All Penang field hospitals closed

GEORGE TOWN: All 10 Armed Forces field hospitals opened to facilitate treatment for Covid-19 patients have been closed in stages following a decline in the number of patients.

The last two — at the Penang Hospital and the Kepala Batas Hospital — were closed yesterday.

Second Division of the Malaysian Infantry Commander Mejar-Jen Datuk Muhammad Huzaimi Sabri said the hospitals were closed after the number of Covid-19 cases showed a significant drop as a result of mitigation efforts and the vaccination programme, which had seen almost 80% of the population inoculated against the coronavirus.

"The objective of the setting up of the military field hospital was to help the hospitals under the Health Ministry in treating Covid-19 patients after bed usage in the hospitals

surpassed 80% of their capacity at the time.

"Throughout the operations of the 24-bed ICU facility in Kepala Batas, a total of 421 patients were treated since May 28, 381 of whom recovered and 40 others died. Three military officers and 29 personnel were attached at the hospital during the operations," he said after attending the symbolic closure of the field hospital in Penang.

Muhammad Huzaimi said at the field hospital in Penang, 499 patients were treated since it opened on Sept 24, with 449 patients recovering while 50 others died.

He said the field hospital had eight ICU beds and 92 regular beds with oxygen tanks and was operated by two Armed Forces officers and personnel.

"The field ICU at Kepala Batas provided treatment to Covid-19

patients in Categories Four and Five, while the field hospital in Penang treated those in Categories Three and Four. The Armed Forces is committed to helping the country in handling and breaking the chain of Covid-19 infections," he said.

Muhammad Huzaimi added that the Armed Forces was prepared to reopen the hospitals should the need arise, especially with the increase of cases involving the Omicron variant.

"So far, we have not received any instructions to reopen the field hospitals."

The field hospital in Kepala Batas was set up using four military containers to house 12 beds, while 15 other beds were placed in four makeshift tents in the hospital parking lot.

The Penang field hospital had 100 beds set up in 23 tents at the parking area. — Bernama

Extra precautions in Labuan

LABUAN: Healthcare personnel here are taking extra precautions against the possible spread of Covid-19 from among those returning from performing the umrah, Bernama reported.

State Health Department director Dr Ismuni Bohari said the pilgrims are required to undergo a mandatory polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test before returning to Labuan.

"They are required to undergo Covid-19 screening upon arrival after performing the umrah pilgrimage, and they will be required to wear digital tracking devices throughout their home surveillance and quarantine

periods."

Ismuni said the home-quarantine order could be cancelled and replaced with hotel-quarantine if the residence of the pilgrims is deemed unsuitable for effective quarantine.

"Our healthcare personnel will visit the premises and conduct the necessary checks at their homes. If it fulfills the requirements, we will allow them to undergo home quarantine. If not, they will have to undergo quarantine in a hotel."

Ismuni said healthcare personnel are on standby at the Labuan Airport and at the two ferry terminals to monitor the return of pilgrims to the duty-free island.