

Coronavirus Singapore/Vaccines

World Economic Forum cancels Aug meeting in S'pore

Lim Min Zhang

The World Economic Forum (WEF) is cancelling its special annual meeting that was scheduled to be held in Singapore in August, with organisers citing the uncertain travel outlook and new Covid-19 variants as reasons.

"Regrettably, the tragic circumstances unfolding across geographies, an uncertain travel outlook, differing speeds of vaccination roll-out and the uncertainty around new variants combine to make it impossible to realise a global meeting

with business, government and civil society leaders from all over the world at the scale which was planned," the WEF said yesterday.

"This is despite the excellent support provided by the Government of Singapore," it added.

The WEF said its next annual meeting will instead take place in the first half of next year. The final location and date will be determined based on an assessment of the situation later this summer.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) said yesterday that the WEF had informed the Singapore Government that due to the continuing global uncertainties caused by

Covid-19, it will be cancelling its special annual meeting for this year, which was scheduled to take place in Singapore from Aug 17 to 20.

"The Singapore Government fully appreciates the challenges caused by the ongoing global pandemic, particularly for a large meeting with a broad span of international participants," MTI said in response to media queries.

"We will continue to work actively with the World Economic Forum and other key international organisations to promote collaborations between stakeholders on issues of global concern," it added.

Professor Klaus Schwab, the

WEF's founder and executive chairman, said of the cancellation: "It was a difficult decision, particularly in view of the great interest of our partners to come together not just virtually but in person, and to contribute to a more resilient, more inclusive and more sustainable world. But ultimately, the health and safety of everyone concerned is our highest priority."

The WEF's annual meeting, traditionally held in Davos, Switzerland, in January, gathers top public and private sector leaders to address pressing global issues. This year's special meeting, which the WEF announced last December

would be in Singapore, would have taken place at Marina Bay Sands, with over 1,000 delegates.

The WEF had shifted the dates for the meeting twice, from mid to end May, and again to August.

In a separate statement yesterday, a spokesman for the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) said the think-tank remains on track to convene the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD) here early next month.

"The World Economic Forum's decision does not affect our plans. We have a full line-up of ministers and other senior leaders from around the world planning to attend our event," the spokesman said.

Responding to media queries, the Ministry of Defence said last night IISS has informed the Govern-

ment that it remains committed to holding the security dialogue.

"We are encouraged by the positive response to invitations to SLD 2021, which underscores the strong commitment of government leaders in addressing security challenges even in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic," Mindel said.

"Nevertheless, as the Covid-19 situation is fluid and continues to evolve... the Singapore Government will continue to monitor the local and global Covid-19 situation and make the necessary adjustments. In doing so, the health and safety of everyone will be the foremost consideration," it added.

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Additional reporting by Justin Ong

News analysis

Vaccinating more people by spacing out doses can slow spread of virus

It is unlikely to affect efficacy and downsides are mainly administrative, says expert



Salma Khalik Senior Health Correspondent

With the surge in Covid-19 community cases this month, experts say that giving one dose of the vaccine to as many people as possible – instead of two doses to fewer people – is the right thing to do.

Currently, the two doses are given three or four weeks apart.

On Sunday, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said Singapore is studying the possibility of giving the second vaccine dose six to eight weeks after the first.

This will allow more people to get at least one vaccine dose.

Singapore is unable to speed up the vaccination process any other way because "the pace is limited by the pace of the supply arriving in Singapore," said Mr Ong.

He also pointed out that older, more vulnerable people have already been vaccinated, and the programme is now moving to younger cohorts.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong, an expert on emerging infectious diseases at the Duke-NUS Medical School, said one dose of the Pfizer or Moderna mRNA vaccine used here gives people 70 per cent to 90 per cent protection from the 12th day.

The second dose raises the protection against severe illness and death to about 95 per cent.

Having more people vaccinated would not only mean more people being protected, but should also reduce the spread of the virus in the community.

The large number of unlinked community cases – 17 on Sunday and 11 yesterday – is worrying, as it is difficult to stop the spread if it is not known where these people caught the virus from.

Of the 35 community infections reported on Sunday, only 13 had been quarantined prior to detection. It is not known how many people have been infected by the other 22, who were roaming freely in the community.



A vaccination centre at Hong Kah North CC. One expert estimated that if Singapore extends the interval for those due for their second jab in the next three weeks, another half a million people could get their first jabs. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

There could also be many more undetected infected people, who are asymptomatic or only mildly sick, passing the virus on to others.

Giving more people one jab can help reduce such community transmissions.

Prof Ooi said a study in Britain found that transmission to household members by infected healthcare workers, who have had a single dose, was a third lower than among those who were not vaccinated.

It fell to half once both doses had been administered, so it is still important to get two doses.

Explaining why those given one vaccine jab are less likely to spread the disease, Prof Ooi said the

immune response could include neutralising some of the virus, and thus lowering the infectious fraction that could be transmitted to others.

"It could also lead to shorter period of infection and hence, also lower the rate of transmission," he added.

Britain was the first country to space out the first and second doses. It did that towards the end of last year, and was criticised by those who said it would diminish the protective effects of the vaccine.

With hindsight, Associate Professor Alex Cook, an expert in infectious disease modelling and statistics at the National

University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said Britain's move "was one of the smartest decisions" and hastened the end of the winter wave there.

He said it was a good time for Singapore to follow that example.

Doing some back-of-the-envelope calculations, senior infectious diseases specialist, Professor Dale Fisher of the National University Hospital, said: "If Singapore expands the interval for those due for second jabs in the next three weeks, it will allow another half a million people to get their first jabs."

As at May 10, more than three

The four variants of concern, all now found here, are more easily transmitted, so although the numbers we are facing today may not be as big as they were last year, the danger remains very real.

UK, France among countries that have delayed 2nd jab

Eileen Ng Regional Correspondent

A number of countries around the world have opted to delay dispensing the second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine as they rush to offer protection to more people as early as possible.

A longer interval between shots has not been tested in clinical trials, but some scientists said the move to delay was sensible, given the emergence of several highly transmissible variants of the coronavirus.

The recommendation for the second dose varies between vaccines, from as early as 21 days to up to 12 weeks apart.

"You will save far, far more lives – on the order of tens of thousands more lives – giving those extra vaccine doses to people for their first shot, getting them from zero to 85 per cent pro-

tected, than using that same capacity (for) giving people their second shot and getting them from 85 to 95 (per cent efficacy)," Dr Robert Wachter of the University of California's Department of Medicine told bi-weekly magazine Science News.

In January, Britain was among the first to take what was then considered an unusual step to delay the second dose of the vaccine by up to 12 weeks to prioritise first jabs to as many people as possible. The country is dispensing three types of vaccines – Pfizer, Moderna and home-grown AstraZeneca.

The move followed a spike in cases last December and in January, driven mostly by the B.117 variant.

That policy resulted in Britain being "one of the countries with the highest vaccine uptake rates in the world," said Vaccines Minister Nadhim Zahawi.

Almost 36 million people have had their first dose, and 20 million

of those have had the second dose.

This has allowed Britain to ease its restrictions from yesterday, allowing indoor dining to return in pubs, cafes and restaurants, while cinemas, museums and sports venues were reopened for the first time in months.

Likewise, Denmark approved last month a delay of up to six weeks between the first and second shots of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

Increasing the gap between doses means that more people will receive their first dose sooner, providing for wider immunity in the population, said the Danish Health Authority.

However, it also cautioned that the original interval of three to four weeks should be followed whenever possible.

Neighbouring Norway followed suit, extending the interval between the first and second doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines from six to 12 weeks for adults un-

der 65 years old.

The Institute of Public Health and Health Ministry said the decision would allow all adults to receive their first jabs by July 25, up from the previous estimate

of Aug 29.

"Increasing the interval will allow many more to be vaccinated earlier. This will prevent serious illness and death, and reduce the overall level of infection in society," Health Minister Bent Høje was quoted as saying.

In France, since last Friday, the authorities have delayed the second Covid-19 jab from four weeks to six weeks to speed up its inoculation campaign.

"(It) will allow us to vaccinate more quickly without reducing protection," Health Minister Olivier Veran told JDD newspaper.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated its guidance to allow up to 42 days between doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to make it more flexible for people to get their second shots.

Canada's National Advisory Committee last December released a guidance in March that allowed provinces to extend the time between the first and second doses to a maximum of four months – if vaccines are in short supply.

"The important thing that we have learnt is that these vaccines work; they give a very high level of

Form your own social bubble and stick to it, says NCID director

Timothy Goh

The nation's Covid-19 situation could be more dangerous than it was just before the circuit breaker last year, and people must go above and beyond what is being asked for to keep safe, said Associate Professor David Lye of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

In a message that was circulating

on WhatsApp and other social media platforms yesterday, the director of NCID's Infectious Disease Research and Training Office called on those here to "do much more beyond what government dictates".

The Straits Times verified the text with NCID, which confirmed that Prof Lye had written it.

Apart from exhorting people to stay home, avoid crowded places and big groups, he also called for people to form their own "small social bubble" consisting of those

who are committed to socialising only within the bubble.

"For many, this is your immediate family," said Prof Lye, who is also a senior consultant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital's (TTSH) Department of Infectious Diseases.

Prof Lye has co-authored multiple papers on Covid-19, covering topics such as potential treatments for coronavirus patients, how the virus may be transmitted and the situation here.

Most recently, he co-authored

a study on how recovered patients could be re-infected with the disease.

Prof Lye is also president of the College of Physicians, Singapore and Society of Infectious Disease (Singapore).

In yesterday's viral message, he said that people should ensure they wear a mask over their mouth and nose even when walking in parks, and that more should get vaccinated as the recent outbreak at TTSH showed that not enough vulnerable old people have done so.

Prof Lye noted that the situation in Singapore last year was bad because of the huge outbreak in dormitories among migrant workers. This was contained with lockdowns – although this took a lot of resources.



Associate Professor David Lye said the spread to the community from the outbreak at the airport may be "wide and far".

working against these efforts are the new variants which originated from India, which infected TTSH and Changi Airport staff despite masks and vaccinations.

"This is serious."

He concluded: "If you want to keep your family safe, you need to listen and do the above."

"If a country is overwhelmed like India, many will die, including children and young people, and sick people cannot get a bed and dead bodies can't get cremated or buried."

"My colleague(s) and I don't want to see you in NCID or any of the hospitals."

ST has approached NCID and Prof Lye for further comments.

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Singaporeans adjust to stricter curbs in phase two

Yesterday marked the first work day of Singapore's phase two (heightened alert), with most employees switching to remote working under new, stricter safe management measures that will be in place until June 13.



The usually busy Orchard Road appeared devoid of motorists and shoppers at around 5.30pm yesterday. ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG



Customers queuing to buy food for takeaway at Market Street Interim Hawker Centre during lunchtime yesterday. Under the new rules, dining in is not allowed. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH



Empty seats – typically a rare sight during peak morning hours – on an MRT train travelling along the East-West Line yesterday at 8.30am. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH



Swab testing being carried out yesterday at White Sands mall for all mall tenants and staff as some visitors to the mall had tested positive for Covid-19 in the past two weeks. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM