

Coronavirus Singapore

# Recent dorm cases likely sporadic; no cause for alarm: Experts

But these underline importance of early vaccinations for workers staying in dorms

Kok Yufeng and Clara Chong

The first Covid-19 cases picked up in foreign worker dormitories in a month are likely to be sporadic ones, experts have said. These should not cause alarm unless more cases start cropping up. However, the fresh cases underscore the importance of early vaccinations for dorm residents, the experts told The Straits Times. No new dorm cases had been reported since Dec 15 last year until a construction worker staying in Seatown Dormitory tested positive last Tuesday.

Last Saturday, the Health Ministry (MOH) reported that a thermal insulator installer from Tuas South Dormitory had also tested positive for Covid-19. Both cases were picked up during rostered routine testing, which is required for all workers in the construction, marine and process sectors, as well as for workers from the manufacturing and service sectors residing in dorms.

The two cases are unlikely. Close contacts, including fellow dorm residents and co-workers, have been placed on quarantine and will be tested at the start and end of their quarantine periods. Serology tests will also be conducted to see if the workers, both work permit holders, could have been infected by their contacts, MOH said last week.

The worker residing in Tuas South Dormitory, an Indian national, was asymptomatic and had a negative serology test, indicating that his case is likely a current infection.

Meanwhile, the worker from Seatown Dormitory had arrived

here from India on Dec 11 and served his stay-home notice (SHN) at a dedicated facility until Dec 25.

Tests on Dec 21 and Dec 27 came back negative so the man started work on Jan 6. After testing positive for the virus last Tuesday, he was given a serology test, which also came back positive.

Associate Professor Alex Cook, vice-dean of research at the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said it is possible the worker was infected before arriving in Singapore, but this would involve a very long incubation period and bad luck with the tests.

The more probable explanation is that he was infected here shortly after exiting quarantine, possibly while at work. Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, said it typically takes at least a week post-infection for serology tests to show a positive result. So the worker would most likely have been infected between last Dec 25 and Jan 5 this year.

Said Prof Teo: "Every single case that is picked up in the dormitory is of concern, given the risk of an accelerated spread... (but) rostered routine testing is already an effective procedure to ensure we are able to identify any infections early and quickly."

Prof Cook cautioned against knee-jerk reactions and said there is no need to tighten restrictions. "Routine testing is meant to break chains of infection, not to prevent infection from ever happening... It's notable that since the rostered routine testing regime really got established, the outbreaks in the dorms that characterised the (initial virus) outbreak in Singapore have been much reduced,"

he said. Regarding the Seatown Dormitory case, the Ministry of Manpower said last Friday that its Assurance, Care and Engagement Group took immediate steps to isolate the worker.

He was taken to a community care facility while residents on the same floor were taken to government quarantine facility.

ST understands that the movement of workers on one floor was temporarily restricted until all close contacts who needed to be quarantined were identified.

Contact tracing data from the worker's BluePass token was used to identify other close contacts, including workers in other dorms. Said the Ministry of Manpower: "The risk of Covid-19 re-emerging in dormitories cannot be taken lightly. We must continue to remain vigilant and disciplined... "We also need to be agile in calibrating our measures."

"Since Jan 6, newly arrived workers who will stay in dorms need to undergo an additional seven-day testing regime at a designated facility after the SHN. Starting yesterday, work permit and S pass holders from the construction, marine and process sectors arriving from higher-risk countries must also be tested on arrival.

The emergence of new dorm cases has rattled migrant workers hoping for a return to normalcy.

Mr Md Sharif Uddin, 42, who moved into Tuas South Dormitory this month, said some are frustrated by the restrictions placed on them and fear that an outbreak could lead to another lockdown.

"We know doctors and nurses and residents will get vaccines first," he said. "I think we need to start on migrant workers also, because we are at higher risk."

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NEED TO STAY VIGILANT

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MINISTRY OF MANPOWER

EFFECTIVE PROCEDURE IN PLACE

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## TraceTogether token collection resumes at 38 CCs

Residents lined up yesterday to collect their TraceTogether tokens – but this time without the long queues seen in October. Distribution of the devices – an alternative to the Covid-19 contact tracing app for those who prefer not to use a phone – resumed at 38 community centres and community clubs (CCs), 12 weeks after it was suspended due to overwhelming demand.

Only a few people were queuing at Anchorvale Community Club, Toa Payoh Central Community Club and Kallang Community Club when The Straits Times visited yesterday. Finance controller Chris Tay, 49, described his experience in Kallang as "smooth and orderly". He said he was turned off by the queues during the previous collection period but this time had managed

to collect his token in a few minutes. Madam Chun Bee Lin, 57, who collected her token at the same community club, said: "The collection process today was quite fast, not like last time when the queue was very long, it's totally different." Ms Denise Kok, 33, also said there was "not much of a queue" when she collected her token at

Toa Payoh Central Community Club. Some residents said they had been looking forward to collecting their tokens, saying it was easier to use and more convenient than the TraceTogether app. "It's just so much easier to scan the token instead of having to open the app all the time," said Ms Kok. Ms Ashley Wong, 35, said that she checked online every day for

updates on token collection, noting that it was out of stock for a long time. "I work in a school and it's mandatory to use TraceTogether, so my phone battery gets flat very fast," the auditor said while collecting her token at Anchorvale Community Club. "Visit token.gowhere.gov.sg for a list of active token distribution venues." **Ivan Kwee**

People collecting their TraceTogether tokens at Anchorvale Community Club yesterday. Some residents had been looking forward to collecting the token, saying it was easier to use and more convenient than the app. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

## Blood plasma from recovered patients reserved for those not responding well: NCID

Cheryl Tan

Blood plasma from recovered Covid-19 patients is reserved for those who are not responding well to initial treatments for the coronavirus, the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) has said. In convalescent plasma therapy, the blood plasma, which may contain antibodies against Covid-19, is

given to infected patients to help them recover faster. It is used to complement initial treatments with steroids and antivirals, and administered as part of a monitored programme by the NCID and Tan Tock Seng Hospital, in collaboration with the Health Sciences Authority and Duke-NUS Medical School, said Dr Shawn Vaso, clinical director of NCID, in response to queries from The Straits Times last week.

## Health and safety of participants top priority for WEF event

Linette Lai  
Political Correspondent

The organisers of the World Economic Forum meeting in Singapore in May will put the health and safety of participants at the forefront of their priorities, said WEF president Borge Brende yesterday evening, adding that Singapore is one of the governments that have handled the Covid-19 pandemic best.

"We have very, very good cooperation here with the Singapore Government," Mr Brende said at a

virtual press conference. The WEF has traditionally held its annual meeting, which gathers top political, business and academic leaders to discuss pressing global issues, in Davos, Switzerland, in end-January. Last year's edition saw 3,000 participants.

But in the light of the Covid-19 situation in Europe, the organisation decided to shift the summit to Singapore from May 25 to 28, and called it a special annual meeting. The WEF has also organised the Davos Agenda 2021, a series of virtual sessions next week to discuss global issues under the theme, "A

crucial year to rebuild trust". More than 1,500 business, government and civil society leaders from over 70 countries will take part in the sessions, which will feed into May's special meeting. Speakers at next week's sessions include Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron.

Last night, Mr Brende also outlined several items on the agenda for the special meeting in May, including rebuilding trust and increasing global cooperation on issues such as climate change. "I don't think anyone is better positioned than the World Economic Forum in Singapore to really make sure that we do achieve really concrete results in these areas," he said. "And we know that Singapore has the facilities to do so."

WEF founder and executive chairman Klaus Schwab also spoke on the importance of net-

working, saying: "Person-to-person contacts are important to create an even higher level of trust." "Rebuilding trust and increasing global cooperation are crucial to fostering innovative and bold solutions to stem the pandemic and drive a robust recovery," Professor Schwab added.

"This unique meeting will be an opportunity for leaders to outline their vision and address the most important issues of our time, such as the need to accelerate job creation and to protect the environment."

The WEF did not confirm how many people were expected at the Singapore meeting, or where it would be held. But it has said that it would be a hybrid conference, with some joining virtually.

The Business Times reported yesterday that the WEF is aiming to draw about 1,000 delegates and intends to hold the event at the Marina Bay Sands complex. Mr Brende said yesterday: "We have good discussions on the best venue, and making sure that all our participants will be safe."

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# Expect quieter CNY with curbs on lion, dragon dances

Dragon dances cancelled while lion dances banned in places like coffee shops, markets and neighbourhoods

Ang Qing and Ng Wei Kai

There will be fewer dancing animals to welcome the Year of the Ox. Dragon dances are cancelled and lion dances cannot perform at many public spaces this year due to Covid-19 restrictions.

These are among stricter infection control measures for lion dance troupes this Chinese New Year, the Singapore Wushu Dragon and Lion Dance Federation announced on Sunday.

The national organisation oversees the promotion of dragon and lion dance activities, and issues the permits for "cai qing" activities.

Businesses and home owners traditionally invite lion or dragon troupes to perform the cai qing (plucking of greens, usually a head of lettuce) ritual on their premises for good luck and fortune.

However, the performances and the accompanying clashing of cymbals and beating of drums will be absent this year from coffee shops, food centres and markets, as well as all homes and residential areas, to prevent crowds from congregating in public.

The number of performers is also capped at eight this year, which rules out dragon dances as they usually require more performers. All performers must also wear masks, except for those controlling the head and the tail during the performance.

Troupes will also have to do more paperwork, such as submitting daily schedules to the police through the federation. A cai qing permit for 16 days costs \$50 this year, down from \$150 last year, before goods and services tax.

Performances adhering to social distancing rules can continue in offices, factories, hotels, temples and shops in mega shopping centres.

Explaining why some larger venues such as temples are allowed to continue to host lion dance troupes, federation president Ang Mong Seng said: "The idea for cai qing this year is a 'private' event with no customers or patrons."

No more than 50 people are allowed at these venues, and they must observe the 1m safe distancing rule.

Despite a more subdued atmosphere this Chinese New Year, establishment owners say they understand the need for the new rules.

"We agree with the restrictions as we also do not want large crowds to gather," said Mr Hong Poh Hin, vice-chairman of the Fochoo Coffee Restaurant and Bar Merchants Associations, which represents over 400 coffee shops in Singapore.

Troupes are expecting huge decreases in revenue this year. Mr Chan Yan Wen, the 26-year-old leader of the Nam Feng Lion Dance Training Centre, estimates that takings will drop by \$20,000 to \$30,000, as most of his regular customers are home owners and neighbourhood businesses.

Some, like Mr Paxson Chiang's troupe, have decided not to perform this year. "Everyone is frustrated but we have no choice – a lot of customers are dropping out and saying it is too much trouble," said the leader of Fei Jiang Dragon and Lion Dance Arts Sports.

"What I don't understand is how lion dances will be allowed in shopping malls but not coffee shops when the crowds in shopping malls are so big," he added. Mr Chiang, 43, this will be the first year since he was 13 years old that he will not be performing.

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CANT BE HELPED

**Everyone is frustrated but we have no choice – a lot of customers are dropping out and saying it is too much trouble.**



MR PAXSON CHIANG, leader of Fei Jiang Dragon and Lion Dance Arts Sports, on not performing this year.



A worker at Tuas View Dormitory. No new worker dormitory cases had been reported since Dec 15 last year until a construction worker staying in Seatown Dormitory tested positive last Tuesday. A Covid-19 case from Tuas South Dormitory was also reported last Saturday. ST FILE PHOTO



Dr Zhou Lihan, co-founder and chief executive officer of MIRXES, a local molecular diagnostic company that developed the new test kit together with A\*Star and Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

## Test kit that detects Covid-19 and flu receives HSA's provisional approval

Clara Chong

A new multi-virus test kit that is able to detect both Covid-19 and the seasonal flu has obtained provisional authorisation from Singapore's Health Sciences Authority (HSA).

The Fortitude Sars-CoV-2 and Flu A/B test kit was jointly developed by the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A\*Star), Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTS) and local molecular diagnostic company MIRXES.

The company is applying for emergency use authorisation from the US Food and Drug Administration, and for approval from Japan's Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency.

Dr Zhou Lihan, co-founder and chief executive officer of MIRXES, said: "Following the deployment of the MIRXES Fortitude Kit worldwide, we continue to monitor and identify global needs in infectious disease testing."

He added: "We are working in close collaboration with key partners such as A\*Star and TTSH to meet these needs by expanding our Fortitude Covid-19 test range. Hospitals and labs in US, Europe and Japan have already expressed interest in deploying the Fortitude Sars-CoV-2 and Flu A/B test kit."

MIRXES has also obtained the Conformite Europeenne mark approval, a European certification, for the new kit.

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