

NCID lab well prepared for any monkeypox cases here: Director

Facility studies diseases in community and pathogens that have not yet reached S'pore

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Singapore's National Public Health Laboratory (NPHL) is "quite well prepared" for any cases of monkeypox here, said its director, Adjunct Professor Raymond Lin.

The facility, which is under the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), has been preparing reagents for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests to screen for the disease, senior medical technologist Natalie Tang said.

Prof Lin said the facility already proved two years ago - when the first case of monkeypox was detected here - that it has the ability to detect and diagnose the disease.

But he added: "From my point of view, monkeypox isn't the dangerous thing... We are actually afraid of something like smallpox, which can be very deadly, and, when it presents, can look like monkeypox. This is one of the things we prepare for, but hope will never happen."

NPHL has two main roles, the first of which is studying any diseases currently in the community - including respiratory viruses, hand, foot and mouth disease, food-borne illnesses, vector-borne illness, antibiotic-resistant pathogens, tuberculosis and human immunodeficiency virus.

"(This is) so we have an early warning if there's an increase in disease, or a change in strain," said Prof Lin, adding that this information helps the public health system

take appropriate measures.

To do this, staff spend about eight hours a day, five days a week, around a whole range of pathogens in NPHL's laboratories.

Ms Tang said: "We have equipment and proper PPE (personal protective equipment), and we are trained - we have knowledge about what is safe and not safe to do. All this helps us to feel very safe."

NPHL's second task is to prepare for pathogens which have not yet reached Singapore.

"We look around the world and see what the threat is," said Prof Lin on Thursday. This allowed NPHL to have a test ready when Singapore's first case of monkeypox surfaced in 2019, and also played a key role in the nation's response to Sars-CoV-2, which causes Covid-19.

Prof Lin explained that, as early as 2019, his team had anticipated that a coronavirus outbreak might be possible here, and so had prepared diagnostic tests which can de-

tect coronaviruses.

NPHL had also improved its ability to sequence and grow viruses by the time Covid-19 hit. All this allowed its team to sequence and grow Sars-CoV-2, which, in turn, provided researchers with samples and information needed to study the coronavirus and combat it.

NPHL also helped ensure that commercially available test kits and vaccines worked well, and worked on detecting and studying different coronavirus variants.

During peaks of infection waves, some of NPHL's staff, such as senior medical technologist Siti Zulaina Mohamed Said, had to work up to 15 hours a day.

She recalled: "I kept telling myself I had to do this for the nation - if we didn't do it, who else would?"

Looking to the future, Prof Lin said there are three main scenarios that he is concerned about, but NPHL is prepared for.

First, another pandemic, possibly

due to a respiratory virus. Acknowledging that the next pandemic "would no doubt hold surprises", Prof Lin said that, nevertheless, Singapore's experience with Covid-19 has prepared it to adapt to the next such crisis.

Second, a vector-borne disease, especially one carried by mosquitoes. Prof Lin noted that this kind of disease can spread widely and rapidly under the right circumstances, but said NPHL's response to chikungunya and Zika has shown its ability to quickly find, identify and test emerging viruses.

Third, the release of highly dangerous pathogens, whether by accident or due to a terrorist act.

"We have adopted new methods for testing panels for multiple pathogens targeted at the likely bio-threat agents, and coordinate with other agencies to prepare for such a scenario. Laboratory preparedness is only one aspect of the whole response framework.

"We will never have things set up perfectly for the next Disease X, but we certainly will do the best we can to have a good chance to succeed," said Prof Lin.

He added that NPHL is continually trying to keep itself updated with the latest technology and training for its staff, and works with researchers from other agencies to do so.

NPHL's facility at NCID - which it moved into in 2019 - is also a far cry from its previous location - a retrofitted kitchen in Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) - where it was based for 10 years.

"(The retrofitted kitchen) was very cramped, and the lab was one-third the size of our current lab," recalled senior medical technologist Loh Pei Ling, who has been with NPHL for 15 years.

NCID's current facility has allowed it to handle a wider range of pathogens, and more efficiently, said Prof Lin.

Ms Tang said some new tests allow her to screen for over a dozen respiratory viruses, a vast improvement over PCR tests, which can screen for only one pathogen.

Still, it is crucial to keep learning and improving, said Prof Lin. He added: "We must be humble because we may think we know things, but they never turn out the way we'd think."

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Malls can use more outdoor spaces for F&B

Clement Yong

The public can look forward to more outdoor dining areas in shopping mall plazas and other outdoor atriums, with the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) yesterday signalling that it will now take a more liberal approach to granting approvals for private owners to use these for food and beverage functions.

This is a new position adopted by the authority following a review after its last guidelines were released in 2017, in the hope that this will empower the community to make public spaces more vibrant, Minister for National Develop-



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ment Desmond Lee said yesterday. Previously, most of such requests outside of the Orchard Road and Singapore River areas were rejected, as only these two areas were given special exemptions due to their significance to tourism.

More privately owned spaces that are publicly accessible will now qualify.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of i Light Singapore, a light art festival held in Marina Bay that is organised by URA, Mr Lee said the Government recognises that bringing people together in shared spaces makes a city more liveable and lovable.

"(It) goes beyond infrastructure plans," he said. "The Government is committed to supporting the community to enliven public spaces."

He said URA will contribute to these ongoing efforts by allowing property owners and developers to propose more outdoor refreshment areas within their premises.

"All developments that have maximised their development po-

tential can propose new outdoor refreshment areas within the public spaces. We hope this will bring about even more meaningful public spaces, and better outdoor dining experiences for all to enjoy," he said.

The new scheme applies to what URA calls privately owned public spaces, which are currently governed by strict rules about their design and use - for instance, that at least 75 per cent of the total public space area must be a contiguous space that is regular in shape.

With the change, more exemptions from these rules will be made. URA said the scheme will be valid for five years, after which it will be reviewed for its effectiveness and relevance.

Examples of such spaces include the open square in front of PLQ Mall in Paya Lebar and the outdoor atrium of Ngee Ann City.

The i Light festival was cancelled in the past two years because of the pandemic.

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URA has signalled that it will take a more liberal approach to granting approvals for private owners to use outdoor spaces for food and beverage functions. Examples of such spaces include the open plaza of PLQ Mall (above) in Paya Lebar. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Three appointed to Council of Presidential Advisers



From left: Justice Chao Hick Tin, Mr Bahren Shaari and Ms Mildred Tan-Sim Beng Mei.

A former senior judge of the Supreme Court, Justice Chao Hick Tin, has been appointed to the Council of Presidential Advisers, replacing former Cabinet minister S. Dhanabalan. The Istana said in a statement yesterday that Mr Dhanabalan's term on the council expired on Wednesday after 18 years of service.

Justice Chao stepped down from his role as senior judge of the Supreme Court on Wednesday after 55 years in the public service.

He is the only judge to have served under all four chief justices since Singapore's independence.

He began his legal career as a state counsel in the Attorney-General's Chambers in 1967 and rose up the ranks as a Supreme Court judicial commissioner in 1987. In 1999, he became a Court of Appeal judge and was later appointed its vice-president, a position he held till he retired in 2017. He became a senior judge of the Supreme Court in 2018.

He was also vice-president of the Singapore Academy of Law (SAL), and between 2003 and 2006, the Singapore Mediation Centre chairman and the Asean Law Association president. His work earned him many awards, including a Public Service Star.

In 2018, he was conferred an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws by the National University of Singapore, and an honorary member for life and fellow for life by the SAL.

Two others were also sworn in and appointed by the President to the council. They are Mr Bahren Shaari, chief executive of the Bank of Singapore, and Ms Mildred Tan-Sim Beng Mei, former managing director with Ernst & Young Advisory.

Mr Bahren, who has more than 30 years of banking experience, received the Singapore Institute of Banking and Finance Distinguished Fellow award in 2016. He also received the Public Service Medal in 2008 and Public Service Star Medal in 2018.

He was appointed to the National University of Singapore's Board of Trustees on June 1 last year.

Ms Tan held various portfolios at Ernst & Young Advisory and was elected to the Asia Pacific Governing Council (Board) of Ernst & Young from 2011 to 2017. She retired from the firm in 2018.

She was awarded the Public Service Medal in 2007 and Public Service Star in 2014 for outstanding community service. She was a Nominated Member of Parliament from 2009 to 2011.

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