

Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong, Co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), at 2019-nCoV Press Conference at National Press Centre on 7 February 2020

Good afternoon. As all of you have heard, so far, the cases of the coronavirus that we have had in Singapore have been mostly imported cases as well as a few locally transmitted ones. We have been able to ringfence and isolate each time something happens. The new development now is that we have a case without any links to the previous cases or any recent travel history to mainland China. In fact, we have been preparing for such an eventuality and that is why we have already strengthened our measures over the last few days. But today, given the latest developments and with the step up to DORSCON Orange, we will now step up further precautionary measures.

First, we will advise all event organisers to cancel or defer non-essential large-scale events. For those who wish to proceed, we will want them to take all necessary precautions, and that will include carrying out of temperature screening, turning away of unwell individuals and making sure that the event venues are adequately ventilated and equipped with facilities for handwashing. We have a series of precautions that we will want all event organisers to take, should they wish to continue with their events.

Second, all employers and individuals should implement regular temperature-taking. They should be done at least twice daily. Organisations can decide on different ways of doing it; it does not have to be done at the individual level. At an office, you can do it at the entrance to the office so that whenever the employees come in, they take their temperature and when they depart from the office, they take their temperature again. Anyone with a fever, or anyone who is unwell, should see a doctor as soon as possible and avoid crowded places as they make their way to see the doctor.

Third, all workplaces should step up their business continuity plans. Many have already done so; many have already put in place these plans. We would like all workplaces to ensure that their plans are in place and step them up. That would include taking measures like telecommuting or having split teams organised and operating separately. These are important measures to also help to reduce the risk of widespread community transmission. These are three additional precautionary measures that we are taking today.

In addition, for the vulnerable groups, we have another three more measures. At the hospital level, MOH will be implementing temperature screening and closer control of entry points to hospitals. Our hospitals will also introduce measures to care for patients with pneumonia separately from other patients to reduce the risk of transmission.

For schools, you have heard from the Director of Schools just now, how they will be suspending all inter-school activities and external activities.

And finally, for preschools and social/eldercare services, we will impose tighter controls on visitors to these premises.

Overall, we are still working hard and doing our very best to prevent broader community spread of the virus in Singapore. That remains our strategy today. But we have to be prepared for the situation to evolve in different ways. One scenario could well be that despite our very best efforts to contain, ring-fence and isolate each case that comes up – despite our best efforts at doing so, there is wider community spread. And if so, as we have done already, we will have to re-assess the situation. If the situation worsens, we may well have to take more stringent measures beyond what we are announcing today.

There is another scenario – which in a way the Director of Medical Services alluded to – because if you look at the situation now, the mortality rate in China is 2% but outside of Hubei province, the mortality rate for this virus is 0.2%. It is much lower than SARS. And if the mortality rate remains low or even continues to fall further, depending on the evidence and depending on how it evolves, then I think we are dealing with something quite different and we may well have to consider a different approach. So these are two scenarios of how the situation may unfold. It is too early to tell right now what the strategy will be but I am just sharing possibilities of how things may unfold in the future.

Meanwhile, for now, I think all of us will have to do our part to stay vigilant, to keep our guards up and carry on with our lives. Minister Gan already earlier shared some practical things that all of us, every Singaporean, can do to protect ourselves and our families. I would summarise it in three simple steps.

First, wash our hands with soap regularly. We cannot say this enough, we keep emphasising this – wash our hands with soap regularly, everyday, more than once, as many times as you can.

Number two, avoid shaking hands. So we are advocating everyone to do a different form of greeting – whatever suits you – but avoid shaking hands. And do not use your hands to touch your face because all the evidence – all the medical evidence – shows that transmissions happen a lot through hands. So that's the second thing we can all do.

And thirdly, all of us can take our temperatures daily, twice a day in fact, as we have suggested just now as an advisory to all employers and individuals. And then if any symptoms show up, if there is any sign of a fever, immediately go and see a doctor.

So these are three practical but – we believe, based on the medical evidence – effective ways that all of us, all Singaporeans can take to protect ourselves and our families.

We know that these are challenging times and Singaporeans are anxious and worried. We understand these concerns and we are doing our very best to put in place effective measures to protect ourselves, to protect every Singaporean. I am confident that if we continue to stand together, if we continue to look out for one another, we can overcome this challenging situation together.