

Remarks by Minister Lawrence Wong, Co-chair of the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on COVID-19, at Press Conference at National Press Centre on 10 March 2020

Let me give some context to add on to what Minister Gan had said just now about the measures we've taken. We started with a range of border control measures because the source of the epidemic of the infection came from abroad. We were amongst the first few countries to put in place border control measures, and it has helped to minimise the number of imported cases coming into Singapore. But as we've said before, we've emphasised, as the virus spreads to countries everywhere, country-specific border control measures will become less relevant and effective because we are unable to shut Singapore from the world. We have to now shift our approach.

We will still maintain some basic surveillance at the borders including using swab tests for travellers who come in, who are febrile or who have respiratory symptoms. But we will have to double down on the measures we can do within Singapore. We will look at the whole range of social distancing measures.

We have already started social distancing because if you look at the measures like isolating patients, putting close contacts on quarantine, issuing Stay-Home Notices, these are social distancing measures which we have already started. Over time, we will have to ramp up and do more social distancing measures.

Today, we are announcing something with regard to suspension of senior activities. Going forward, we will look at a fuller range of social distancing measures we can put in place including for public events, community activities, school closures, workplace social distancing including things like staggered hours, telecommuting as well as religious services too. We will cover a broad spectrum and we will see what we should put in place.

We are very mindful that these measures can be very disruptive to the lives of Singaporeans. If we were to do all of them at one time, we will literally have to shut down our city and everything will grind to a halt. If we were to start some of them too early, people may become fatigued and then you cannot sustain the measures, and then it will not be effective either. So getting the measures right, and applying them at the right time, is critical.

In that context, it is useful to think of this broad sweep of social distancing measures as something we can apply from time to time, as circuit breakers throughout the entire epidemic cycle. By doing so, we put in brakes to try and stop, or slow down the transmission chain, and flatten the epidemic curve.

That should be our thinking around social distancing, and it's something we are actively studying. We are putting in something today, and there will be more measures that we will continue to consider over the coming days and weeks. As I said, it is critical to implement the right measures at the right time, and we will do so based on the data, evidence and expert advice.

Some of these measures will be implemented on a temporary basis, like what we are doing today, or over a discrete period of time. But there will also be measures put in

place on a permanent basis – they ought to be part of our habits and our new way of life.

One example is the whole SG Clean campaign – that’s why we started with that early. That’s something we should do, not just with this particular outbreak, but in fact we should adopt better hygiene standards at the personal level, at the public level. These are things we should be doing permanently. We will continue to emphasise some of these things – permanent measures like washing hands frequently with soap, improving hygiene standards in all our public places, use of common serving utensils rather than double-dipping.

These are things we will continue to emphasise, and we want these things to be done on a permanent basis. For the other measures, not all of them will be permanent – some will be done over a temporary or discrete time period as I said. We can apply them at different phases through the epidemic cycle, and we will be looking at what is the appropriate time and juncture to introduce some of these additional measures.