

REMARKS BY MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG, CO-CHAIR OF THE MULTI-MINISTRY TASKFORCE ON COVID-19, AT THE PRESS CONFERENCE ON COVID-19 AT NATIONAL PRESS CENTRE ON 7 JULY 2020

Good evening. I will provide a little bit more of the elaboration on the infection situation, focusing mainly on the community cases that we have seen after the Circuit Breaker, in other words, since the start of reopening.

As you heard just now from Minister Gan, if you look at the picture of community cases from Phase 1 onwards, about 57 per cent of them are linked and the remaining 43 per cent are unlinked; so about 60 - 40, linked versus unlinked. Amongst the unlinked cases, half are in the construction and construction-related activities. The vast majority of these cases were identified through our active surveillance – in other words, our proactive testing and periodic testing of construction workers every 14 days. It is because we have put in place this regime, that is why we are able to identify these workers and pick them up. Two-thirds of them have tested positive on serology, which means that they are older infections; not recent ones. This is not surprising in a way because we have just come off a period where we have had very high incidence of infection in the entire construction industry. We are systematically clearing the workers in the dormitories. We have suspended construction activities for quite some time, and then only now starting to resume some of these activities. In a way, we are now picking up some of these older infections as we go about the periodic testing of the workers.

But the fact that there is such a continued high incidence of positive COVID results amongst these construction workers remind us of the need to stay extremely vigilant for this sector. That is why we have to do two things.

First, we have to be very rigorous in the way we go about clearing the dormitories. It takes time to do this; and we hear from time to time, contractors asking us to just release the workers, insisting that it is okay. But we have to take the extra precautions to make sure that the clearance is done rigorously before we can allow these workers to go back to work. The second precaution we have to take is to make sure that the contractors themselves put in place new management practices. It is not just about the workers being cleared, but also that the contractors put in place new safe management practices because of the nature of construction activities – it is high touch, high interactions. Very often workers (gather) from all over, different areas, and sometimes not just the builders themselves, even architects, engineers, foremen – all coming together interacting closely on the work site or in enclosed spaces. That sort of a nature of the industry makes it higher risk, and that is why it is important for contractors to have all the safe management practices in place – split team arrangements and housing arrangements for the workers before work can resume.

And, again, we have been engaging the industry very closely. We know it is quite a lot of things that have to be done, and a lot of new requirements are put in place, and we have been engaging the industry closely and providing additional support to the contractors as well in order for them to get ready for the restart and resumption of the construction activities. So that is on the unlinked side – I said about 60/40 – 40 per cent unlinked, and then about half in construction.

On the side of the linked cases in the community, we know that the vast majority of them are cases transmitted through households. That is not surprising because, again, we now know that the nature of the virus is such that it spreads very quickly with close contacts. And, if you are living together in a household, it is very, very hard to prevent the virus from spreading to your household members.

But what is interesting is also to see the patterns of transmission beyond the household. There are some infections taking place also in workplaces, and that is one area where all of us can do our part to reduce the risk of transmission further. Businesses, companies and employers all have to step up their safe management practices at work in order to further reduce the risk of transmission at workplaces. Making sure that the majority of the employees continue to work from home is one precaution that every employer should continue to take. Beyond that, for those who have to be in office, having split teams, making sure they do not gather together for social activities – these are important precautions that everyone, every employer, should continue to uphold.

Finally, for the linked cases, we have also found that there are very few of them that are happening through social gatherings – very few of these linked cases in the community take place through social interactions. That is quite different from the pattern before the circuit breaker was imposed. Remember, at that time, we highlighted that a lot of the transmission was happening because of social gatherings. This was pre-circuit breaker.

Today, this pattern is not seen in the infection numbers, and that is because we have now imposed very tight restrictions on social activities. We are not allowing large gatherings, events, dinners. We still put in place a lot of restrictions. So the restrictions are helping, but at the same time we should not be complacent. Many of us certainly would like to see these restrictions being relaxed over time so that we can engage in more activities. But if we want to do that, then all of us, again, need to be responsible, be vigilant, and do our part to avoid infections from picking up in these social settings.

So the picture on the social side is positive – we are not seeing transmissions happening through social interactions. But it is also a reminder for us that we cannot take this for granted. The numbers are low, partly because of today's restrictions. And, if we want to be able to progressively relax some of these restrictions over time, we do need to step up to take responsibility for our actions, and to ensure that all of us do our part to minimise the spread of the virus.

So that is the overall picture that we are seeing today in terms of the community spread, both linked and unlinked cases. We are continuing to monitor this situation very closely. We are stepping up and scaling up testing and tracing to the maximum extent that we can. With all of these measures in place, we certainly will try our very best to continue to control the infection as we proceed through the coming weeks in the Phase 2 of this reopening. Thank you.