

TRANSCRIPT OF MINISTER LAWRENCE WONG'S OPENING REMARKS AT THE MULTI-MINISTRY TASKFORCE PRESS CONFERENCE ON 2 OCTOBER 2021

Good evening. Thank you to the members of the media for joining us on a Saturday evening. We are one week into the stabilisation phase so we thought it would be useful to give everyone an update on the overall situation.

I would like to start by thanking everyone in Singapore for cooperating with the new measures that were introduced as part of the stabilisation phase and the reduced group sizes. I would also like to thank everyone for your patience and understanding, especially those who have been adjusting to the teething issues in our new healthcare protocols like the ones for home recovery. There are teething issues. We know it is frustrating for those who have difficulties getting through to our helplines, and that is why as Minister Ong said just now, the entire team is working flat out, together with reinforcements from the SAF to resolve these outstanding issues.

Meanwhile, we continue to monitor the infection situation closely. Up to now, we haven't really experienced the full impact of the tightening measures that were introduced in the stabilisation phase because it takes at least one week for any such measures to see results. But already we are seeing some signs of slowing in the rate of transmission. Just to illustrate, on 3rd September, we had 210 local community cases. Now by community cases, I did not include dormitory cases because they are in a different category. Later on, I will invite Dr. Tan to say more about them, but look at community cases without the dormitory cases for the time being.

3rd September, we had 210. By 9th September, it doubled to over 420, so that took six days to double. Seven days later on 16th September, it doubled to over 840 cases. Again, a doubling at about a week. Then on 28th September, which was about 12 days later, it is more than doubled slightly to 1,700 cases, so the doubling time has become longer. And now we are hovering around 2,000 local community cases a day. Looking at the data, it would suggest that the doubling time of cases has started to take a bit longer – from a week to about 10 days now. We will continue to monitor the situation over the next few days to see what impact the new measures have in slowing down the rate of transmission.

To be clear, as we have stated before, we do not expect the new measures to help to bring down the total number of daily cases. Rather, the new measures are aimed at slowing the rate of increase of transmission, and that is to give us the time to stabilise all the healthcare protocols we talked about, and to strengthen and enhance capacity in our hospital system. Of course, no wave will last forever. Eventually at some point, even after you see some of the results of our latest measures, it is not going to bring the cases down, but it will slow the rate of increase and eventually at some point the wave will crest.

It is hard to tell when this will happen or what the peak will be. We consulted experts from our universities on this matter, and there are a range of different views. Some think that the wave can peak at about 5,000 new daily cases or slightly above that. Some think that it will go much higher to around 10,000 daily cases so there is a range of uncertainty. No model can predict with absolute certainty what the epidemic curve will look like in the next few weeks. It just simply means that we have to be prepared for this range of possible outcomes. Whatever the curves, whatever the new cases are in the coming weeks, we just have to use this time to have enough capacity to deal with the wave of cases and to review, update and simplify our healthcare protocols, as Minister Ong said just now, so that people can understand and can comply with the measures. That is what we are doing during this period.

Of course, when we see such a surge of cases during these few days, several thousand a day, I know it can be quite worrying. And you have two sorts of very sharp reactions from

different people. One group says, “Look, it’s so high, let’s quickly lock down and bring cases down.” Another group says, “Well, this is completely to be expected. After all, we talked about being living with COVID, so move forward.”

Let me just respond briefly to these two groups. The reaction to the first group that wants to tighten further is: Look, we have gone beyond that point. We have already said because of our high vaccination rate, we are no longer focusing solely on headline numbers. Our focus is on the people who are seriously ill, and to make sure that our healthcare system is able to take care of them. That remains our focus. Let us not get too carried away by the headline numbers, or too anxious or fearful about those numbers.

Our response to the second group who wants to continue opening up is this: please be patient. Our overall strategy to reopening has not changed. But this is the first time we are experiencing such a big wave, and it is causing tremendous stresses on our healthcare system and our healthcare workers. Procedures, protocols have to be changed and adjusted, new capacity has to be added into the system. All these take a little bit of time, and that is why we are putting in place these measures in the stabilisation phase so that we can get all these things ready.

Even as we go about this exercise during this period, this week and over the next few weeks, I think we should also be prepared that this will not be the last wave we experienced. We are riding one major, one big wave now, but we should be mentally prepared that there will be subsequent waves to follow. Why is that so? It is because we are one of the most Covid-naive populations in the world, unlike for example, many other European countries, we have kept infections in Singapore low for a very long time.

Many European countries experienced large waves last year. If you recall, they went through these waves before they had the chance for their people to be vaccinated, and many countries ended up paying a high price, suffering high fatalities because of the waves that they experienced last year. But now, they have a much higher level of natural immunity, and together with the vaccination programmes that they have introduced, many of these countries have reached a new Covid-stable situation where they are able to resume activities and they have not seen any resurgence of cases.

We are in a different position. In many ways, we are fortunate because we are facing this wave now with a much more highly vaccinated population, and that means that the vast majority of our people will be protected against serious illness. That also means that we can get through this, and any subsequent waves with fewer casualties than the European countries. Eventually, we will reach a point with high vaccinations and with a higher level of natural immunity, we too will eventually reach a point, perhaps months later, where we are more similar to the European countries, and the COVID situation stabilises, and we are able to reopen more confidently without seeing a new wave of cases.

As we get through this process of experiencing these waves, I think we have to remember something. For the vast majority of people who catch the virus in Singapore, because of our high vaccination rates – 98% – the vast majority of them will have zero or mild symptoms, and we can all recover from home for the 98% of cases. There is nothing to be fearful about. In fact, there is nothing to be embarrassed about if you catch Covid because sooner or later, many of us will end up catching the virus. But we will have zero or mild symptoms, recover from home after a few days, we will be able to get back on our feet and go back to work. But for the 2% who falls seriously ill, we have to take care of this group, and we have to take care of them in our hospitals and in our Covid treatment facilities which we are building more of.

2% may appear small, but 2% of a large number of people who are infected is quite a sizable group. And that is why as I said again, we are using this time to stabilise all our protocols, make sure the procedures are in place, and build up the necessary capacity in our healthcare

system to take care of this group, so that even as we experienced this and any subsequent wave, we will be able to ensure that anyone who needs medical care will be appropriately treated, and we can ride the curve, while minimising any unnecessary deaths. The bottom line is that we remain committed to our reopening plans and to be a Covid-resilient nation, and we will do so while safeguarding lives and protecting livelihoods of everyone in Singapore. Let me turn to Dr. Tan, who will give you an update on the situation in the dormitories.