

Wuhan virus: SITUATION IN SINGAPORE

Ministers laud calm and orderly collection of free masks

Almost no queues at collection sites visited by ST; 6% of households have taken masks

Yip Wai Yee and Fabian Koh

The disciplined and orderly way the public has responded to the island-wide mask distribution shows a society that is cohesive and resilient, said Communications and Information Minister S. Iswaran yesterday.

On the sidelines of a Chinese New Year celebration for residents at West Coast Vista Residents' Committee (RC) centre, Mr Iswaran said: "I've had many examples of people I've met who basically said that they won't be collecting the masks because they have enough of their own, and that it's better to leave them for others who need it more."

"I think this speaks volumes about the kind of society that we

are. This is something we should cherish and continue to reinforce in Singapore."

The Government said last Thursday that all 1.3 million households will each get a pack of four masks amid reports of shops running out of stock. Distribution began on Saturday and will end on Feb 9.

Around 6 per cent of all households had collected their masks by the end of distribution on Saturday, said Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee at a separate event yesterday.

Mr Lee said after visiting a mask collection centre at the RC centre at Block 47 Telok Blangah Drive: "People have been very calm. There's been a steady stream of Singaporeans and households collecting the masks. There aren't any reports of anxiety or distress."



Social and Family Development Minister Desmond Lee (in red) visiting a mask collection counter manned by volunteers at the residents' committee centre at Block 47 Telok Blangah Drive yesterday. Distribution of the masks began on Saturday and will end on Feb 9. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

He added that the authorities are pacing the distribution to ensure that it is orderly.

There were almost no queues at collection centres visited by The Straits Times yesterday. There were more volunteers and staff manning the desks than residents arriving to collect masks.

A 68-year-old housewife, who wanted to be known only as Madam Chan, said she was pleasantly surprised that she could collect her pack of masks at West Coast Heights RC within minutes.

She said in Mandarin: "I thought that there would be a crowd because everyone kept saying that the

stores have run out of stock. I'm very happy with how well-organised this has been."

Any masks left over will be put to good use, said Mr Iswaran.

The Ministry of Health will decide on the next step in such a case, he said. "Clearly, our highest priority is to ensure that our healthcare services are well supplied with these masks because they are at the front line in many ways, and therefore we need to ensure that they are well resourced to do the job that they're doing."

Mr Lee noted that the country has multiple layers of defence against the Wuhan coronavirus out-

break, including tighter restrictions at land, sea and air checkpoints, while temperature-taking and other forms of health screening are being carried out in the community, along with travel declarations.

Staff from the Ministry of Social and Family Development have been visiting facilities such as pre-schools and homes for people with disabilities to support front-line officers.

They have been going over specific public health plans and safeguards, and getting feedback on how to improve on working together.

Mr Iswaran said: "Our public sector, officials and our various agencies have all had to respond to a very fast-evolving situation, and then come together with a very clear plan of action, and then execute."

"That, again, attests to the mettle of our society and our public service, notwithstanding the fluid nature of the situation."

Mr Lee and Mr Iswaran also stressed the need to weed out falsehoods and inaccurate information and urged people to turn to official government channels for updates.

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Workload heavier but NCID's front-line staff take it in their stride

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Even as the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak keeps the staff at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) busy, they are taking it in their stride, having anticipated an outbreak like the current one.

Dr Chia Po Ying, an associate consultant at the department of infectious diseases at NCID, said the work now is similar to that before the Wuhan virus outbreak, but the workload is heavier.

Singapore now has 18 cases, and a majority of the patients are being cared for at NCID.

Dr Chia was recalled to work on the third day of Chinese New Year, but said such situations are to be expected as the number of cases rise.

Her team member, senior staff

nurse Benjamin Low, said he and his colleagues go for courses regularly to refresh their skills so that when an outbreak happens, they are prepared.

One noticeable difference is that the staff are wearing the personal protective equipment more often than before. They do this each time they attend to patients, whether it is to take their vital signs like temperature or to serve them food, and they help one another to make sure the gear is worn properly.

Said Dr Chia: "We are front-line (staff) and we are well-versed in all these infection control practices. We are well-trained."

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said at an event at NCID last Friday that the outbreak was a shock but not a surprise. He thanked the front-line staff that day and said the facility, which was then caring for nine out of 13 confirmed infection



Most of Singapore's Wuhan virus patients are being cared for at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases where staff have anticipated an outbreak like the current one and are well-trained for such an event. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

needed to motivate myself and reassure my staff that we are ready, we are safe, and that there are protocols to handle the situation," she said.

Her job is to screen patients suspected of having the virus, sifting out the high-risk cases for further testing. To do so, she wears an N95 mask, a visor to protect her eyes, as well as gloves and a hospital gown.

"A lot of worried people come in. They may not fit the criteria, but they are still worried," she said.

She added: "Of course, our families and friends are worried for us, but we have to reassure them that we are taking the necessary precautions."

Mr Low, the senior staff nurse, said: "My wife is a nurse and she's not worried... because she has confidence in the way we don our protective gear. If you're not taking short cuts and if you're following good infection control practices, you are very well protected."

While the coronavirus is spreading fast in China and the death toll is rising, Associate Professor Brenda Ang, a senior consultant at the department of infectious diseases at Tan Tock Seng Hospital and NCID, has reason to be calm.

She is a Sars veteran, having worked through the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak in 2003.

"When we had a patient who brought back Sars, it was before the world knew that there was such a thing," she said. "Don't worry, we have been through this before."

Nurse manager Imrana Banu Khider Mohamed, who manages a team of 25 healthcare staff, said that she initially felt some fear of the unknown when news first broke about the outbreak. "But I

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• Additional reporting by Linette Lai

Why healthcare workers are wearing protective gear

There has been talk online in the past week of suspected Wuhan coronavirus cases in various malls, because healthcare workers were seen wearing personal protective gear, complete with long-sleeved gowns and gloves.

But people should not be unduly alarmed at the sight of these workers garbed in such personal protective equipment (PPE) while at work.

The equipment, which include items such as masks, gloves, gowns, caps and goggles, are a sign that every precaution is being taken in preventing the spread of the Wuhan virus in Singapore.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) said on its website that the PPE is needed to create a barrier between healthcare workers and the infectious agents from patients, and to reduce the risk of transmitting micro-organisms from healthcare workers to patients.

Dr Brenda Ang, chairman of the infection control committee at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, said in an interview at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) on Friday that wearing the PPE is a reasonable thing to

do for healthcare workers handling a suspected case.

This is because "they are in close contact, they are speaking to the patient... sometimes, they have to carry the patient."

The Wuhan coronavirus is believed to be spread mainly through respiratory droplets, she noted.

Generally, for diseases that are spread via droplets, transmission can occur when one is within 1m to 2m of the infected person who is coughing, sneezing or talking. Indirect contact transmission may also be possible, as the droplets can settle on a surface.

Indeed, since Jan 4, soon after news of the outbreak broke in December last year, the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) ambulance crew, including the drivers, have been donning the PPE when conveying suspected cases to the hospitals.

A spokesman said the SCDF's emergency ambulance medical crew wore the PPE when responding to cases where patients displayed fever or respiratory symptoms - for example, cough, wheezing or shortness of breath - and if they had travelled to

China in the past 14 days.

Mall management staff also stock the PPE, as part of their precautionary measures because they would have to escort any suspected case to a holding area before the ambulance arrives.

CapitaLand said in a statement last Wednesday that it has implemented precautionary measures in accordance with guidelines from the authorities.

Besides stepping up cleaning efforts, hand sanitisers are available for tenants, shoppers and guests at its properties in Singapore. There are also designated premises with predetermined routes within its properties for the isolation of suspected cases.

CapitaLand manages 20 operational malls, including Bugis Junction, Ion Orchard and Tampines Mall.

A spokesman for Frasers Property Retail, which owns and/or manages 14 malls such as Eastpoint Mall, Causeway Point and Waterway Point, said that since mid-January, precautionary measures that follow updated protocols for pandemics have been implemented in its malls.

"Staff have been briefed on the

proper usage and disposal of personal protective equipment when facilitating the movement of any patient suspected to have the virus to the mall's ambulance pick-up point," he said.

"All suspected patients will be escorted through a designated route designed to minimise exposure of the patient to the public. Thereafter, the staff will thoroughly disinfect the affected areas and dispose of their gear in decontamination bins."

Dr John Cheng, head of primary care at Healthway Medical Group, said that aside from simply putting on PPE, appropriate training is necessary to ensure their proper use and disposal.

Staff at the group's clinics have been wearing surgical masks in anticipation of suspected cases.

However, "when examining a suspected case, our healthcare personnel will put on long-sleeved gowns, N95 masks and gloves due to the close contact and duration of exposure", said Dr Cheng.

Being in close contact puts them at higher risk of contracting the virus, he added.

"It is not necessary for members of the public to go to that extent, but rather look to practise good hygiene and other preventive measures such as avoiding crowded spaces, covering your nose and mouth when sneezing and putting on a surgical mask" when sick.

No need to avoid places visited by confirmed patients

Clara Chong

The authorities have said there is no need to avoid places where people suspected or confirmed to have the Wuhan coronavirus have been.

The government advisory, published on its Facebook page on Saturday, comes as a WhatsApp message has been circulating with a list of places allegedly visited by people suspected or confirmed to have the Wuhan coronavirus.

"This is false. There is no need to avoid places where persons with suspected or confirmed cases of the Wuhan coronavirus have been," the notice said.

"The risk of infection from transient contact, such as in public places, is low. There is also currently no evidence of community spread."

Meanwhile, the National Environment Agency (NEA) also published a similar advisory on Saturday.

The agency assured the public that its officers have been liaising closely with and providing support to residents and owners of premises to ensure that cleaning and disinfection are done according to NEA's guidelines.

NEA has also issued sanitation and hygiene advisories to places frequented by the public, such as hotels, food and beverage outlets and hawker centres.

"There is no need for members of the public to avoid these places. We advise members of the public to not speculate and/or spread unfounded rumours," NEA said on Facebook.

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• The public should refer to official sources of information for updates on the Wuhan coronavirus, such as the Ministry of Health's website at <http://www.moh.gov.sg> and the Gov.sg website.

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