



01 FEB, 2021

No free rides in virus fight

The Star, Malaysia

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Plain speaking
YAP LENG KUEN



No free rides in virus fight

Everyone should contribute to efforts to contain the pandemic, leaving selfishness aside

"All parties need to play a role in breaking the chain of Covid-19 infections, as concerns relate to clusters at the workplace."

Datuk Ho Hon Sang

WITH workplace clusters identified as a major culprit of Covid-19 infections, many companies are taking aggressive measures to deal with the problem.

As the virus has also found its way into the community, the onus falls on every company and individual to take utmost care and preventive steps.

In the absence of the long arm of the law, the burden of duty now falls on every man, woman and child to observe good practices.

But the bigger issue is what do we do with selfish people who do not contribute to these efforts, but also get to enjoy the benefits when a lower infection rate is finally achieved.

Without suffering inconveniences and costs incurred in putting up preventive measures, they also enjoy when there are lesser restrictions in movement.

"The free rider problem is a major shortcoming in the issue of public goods," said former Inter-Pacific Securities head of research Pong Teng Siew.

It is actually time to crack the whip, as money spent on strict prevention measures will result in less costs than ordering a total shutdown.

If need be, instead of putting up roadblocks, the government should send officers of authority including the police or the reserve army to those areas with high Covid-19 clusters, said Areca Capital CEO Danny Wong.

Following the escalating Covid-19 cases in Klang, Malaysia Smelting Corp Bhd (MSC) has stepped up its safety efforts at its new smelting facility in Pulau Indah, Port Klang. As Vitamin C and D3 are known for their immunity strengthening properties, MSC has distributed these health supplements to its employees.

MSC has also negotiated with its panel of clinics to undertake Covid-19 testing for its employees, with accurate results made available within the same day of testing.

As all its employees are required to undergo temperature checking before entering the premise, the company can quickly detect

employees with elevated temperatures who will be then sent to its panel of clinics for the swab test. Infected employees are required to be isolated for further treatment.

"This process helps us to identify infected workers easily, enabling us to act swiftly and take further preventive measures to curb the spread of the virus," said MSC group CEO Datuk Dr Patrick Yong.

Separate housing arrangements are provided for MSC's essential workers, in compliance with social distancing; this is to lower the exposure to the Covid-19 virus among its essential workers and ensure minimal disruption to the business.

Other measures in line with health requirements include sanitising the workplace three times a day, making available hand sanitisers at all basin points, providing free masks and face shields for employees who are required to work in close proximity.

With about 30% of the Covid-19 clusters coming from the manufacturing sector, the industry is "deeply alarmed by the warning from the Health Ministry that the country's health system is at a breaking point", said Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers president Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai.

Besides other urgent measures, there is a need for greater attention to workers' hostels and housing which have been identified

as breeding grounds for Covid-19.

The major obstacle now is the lack of hostels and centralised living quarters, and also in terms of facilitation of approvals by local authorities, said Soh.

At Gamuda, a Covid-19 taskforce had been set up during the first movement control order, with mass screening via the antibody test kit method using blood sample collection, and antigen rapid test kit (RTK-Ag) using nasopharyngeal swab samples.

Mandatory screening for all project staff was conducted once in two weeks. As the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) laboratory was launched last November, Gamuda migrated from doing RTK tests to the gold standard PCR testing.

Gamuda is in the fifth cycle of biweekly PCR testing and the mass screenings, contact tracing and quarantine arrangements are well-established.

A crucial factor in its success is the adoption of a centralised digital system which links the test results to individuals via their unique QR codes.

At the construction sites, access via QR codes, is given only if the individual is tested negative within the validity period.

Mah Sing hopes the government can subsidise regular testing either based on RTK or PCR for workers, as well as for the workers to be considered for early rounds of vaccina-

tion, once available, as they contribute to major sectors of the economy.

"We understand all parties need to play a role in helping to break the chain of Covid-19 infections, as much of the concern relates to clusters at the workplace," said Mah Sing CEO Datuk Ho Hon Sang.

Mah Sing ensures that all those involved at the construction sites, as well as workers' accommodation and their movements, strictly comply with the regulations of the labour workforce, and standard operating procedures (SOPs) and guidelines set by the government.

Regular updates and feedback from Mah Sing's construction sites are mandatory to ensure that all actions taken are in the right direction, with emphasis on continuous improvements and adaptations in each practice.

This is to safeguard the workforce and ensure that its operations will not be disrupted.

Industry players in the construction sector are "doing their very best to get their workers screened for Covid-19 and provide them with proper accommodation," said Master Builders Association of Malaysia (MBAM).

"We are sure that most construction companies have been complying with all the SOPs set by the government; as most cases are asymptomatic, it gets tougher to identify an infected person. We must not let our guard down, while good practices must be enhanced at all sites," said MBAM.

As cases are picked up by mass testing, there must be adequate and well-coordinated facilities to cope with the increased volume of tests and for timely release of test results.

Yap Leng Kuen is the former business editor of StarBiz. Views expressed here are the writer's own.



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SUMMARIES

WITH workplace clusters identified as a major culprit of Covid-19 infections, many companies are taking aggressive measures to deal with the problem. As the virus has also found its way into the community, the onus falls on every company and individual to take utmost care and preventive steps. In the absence of the long arm of the law, the burden of duty now falls on every man, woman and child to observe good practices.