Press Statement   29   January 2020

Prevention of 2019-nCoV needs drastic approach

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) urges the government to ban visitors from affected areas from coming into Malaysia to reduce the risk of 2019-nCoV, also known as Wuhan coronavirus infection, and to implement stringent health checks.

It is erroneous to assume that it is possible to identify suspected cases by conducting fever screening at transportation terminals because it is not a guaranteed approach.

The reason why is because, unlike SARS or ebola, a person with 2019-nCoVcan spread the coronavirus even before the manifestation of symptoms and without his knowing it. The other point is that the person may suppress his low-grade fever with some anti-fever medication. Either way the person would not be identified for isolation. He will remain contagious as long as the symptoms persist.

We also have to be on a lookout for cases whereby persons contracted 2019-nCoV opt for traditional medicines and these cases escape medical monitoring. Such a situation facilitates a widespread epidemic.

It is assuring that the air in an aircraft cabin is efficiently recirculated, passing through HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filters of the type used in hospital operating theatres and intensive care units to trap dust particles, bacteria, fungi and viruses. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) also stated that "transmission of infection may occur between passengers who are seated in the same area of an aircraft, usually as a result of the infected individual coughing or sneezing or by touch (direct contact or contact with the same parts of the aircraft cabin and furnishings that other passengers touch)".[1] Obviously, the situation will be worse if the infected person travel by bus where the air is not filtered but recirculated.

Efficient transport systems aid the spread for diseases faster than desired. A person travelling from China to Kuala Lumpur by air, for example, will take about 6 hours. Such short travelling time enables an infected person to spread the 2019-nCoV when he is in the airport terminal. Others who picked up the infection might take flights to different countries thereby making Hubei lockdown symbolic but ineffective to prevent a global epidemic.
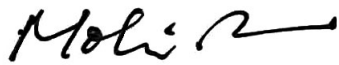
The first case of 2019-nCoV was first reported on 31 December 2019 and the lockdown of Wuhan took place on 23 January 2020. Considering the population dynamics of a place, the huge time period has enabled people to travel in or out of Wuhan or even travel overseas.

When the infamous 1918 influenza pandemic, colloquially known as Spanish flu, infected about 500 million people worldwide, killing between 50 million and 100 million of them it shook the world to its core. It took place when the world population was about 1.8 billion and the transportation was not as

efficient as it is today. Despite these, the Spanish flu killed an estimated three to five per cent of the entire world population.

Today the world population has been estimated to be 7.8 billion or 4.3 times that of 1918, mostly living in urbanised areas. Densely populated townships or cities facilitate the spread of viral diseases, such as the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) viruses and most recently the Wuhan coronavirus infection.

We call on Malaysians to take this as a lesson for Malaysians to desist from eating meats of wildlife, keeping exotic pets. Population growth is causing human population to intrude into closer proximity with vectors and wildlife, increasing the risk of transmission of zoonotic diseases. The government should also take stock of its medical logistics if it is capable to cope with a full blown 2019-nCoV epidemic.

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