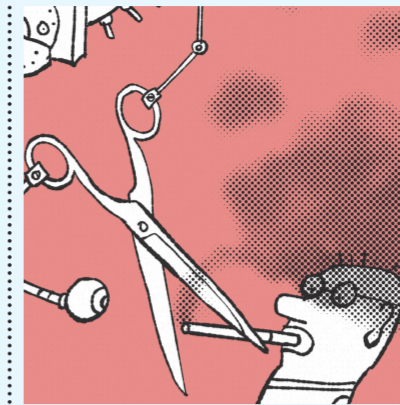


Must-reads

THE BIG STORY
Singapore, China ink 14 deals at high-level forum
 Singapore and China have pledged to explore new areas of collaboration, in particular in digital economy and green development, with the signing of 14 agreements yesterday. The 17th Joint Council for Bilateral Cooperation was co-chaired by Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat and Chinese Vice-Premier Han Zheng. **A1**



WORLD
HK pro-democracy media outfit closes after raid
 Hong Kong's last prominent anti-government and pro-democracy online media outfit has closed, with six people linked to The Stand News, including pop star and activist Denise Ho, held for sedition. Police also nabbed a former employee of Apple Daily for the same offence in a day of raids yesterday. **A16**



OPINION
Time for a tobacco-free generation in Singapore
 Smoking causes eight million deaths each year globally, of which an estimated 1.2 million die from second-hand smoke. Opinion editor Grace Ho says the conditions are ripe to take bolder steps towards a tobacco-free generation in Singapore by prohibiting tobacco sale to those born after a certain year. **A25**

Coronavirus: Singapore
Things are improving, we don't have to live in fear: President Halimah

Osmond Chia

Despite the uncertainty caused by the ongoing pandemic, Singaporeans can be optimistic and should not be paralysed by fear, as things are improving, said President Halimah Yacob in a year-end message yesterday.

She called for people to display resilience so both Singaporeans and the national economy can bounce back, as she outlined some of the challenges the nation faced this year in her four-minute

speech uploaded on Facebook. "I know that many are tired and long for normalcy... But we still face great uncertainty, especially when there's still so much that's unknown about the Omicron variant," she said.

"However, it is not all gloom and doom. Things are improving. We don't have to live in a climate of paralysing fear."

Listing several high points of the year, she said Singaporeans are fortunate that financial resources were managed wisely as the nation drew on past reserves for a number of support measures.



President Halimah Yacob outlined some of the challenges the nation faced this year in her speech uploaded on Facebook. PHOTO: HALIMAH YACOB/FACEBOOK

"We did not have to borrow in order to help our people and businesses. In this way, we do not saddle our future generations with a debt burden, the situation faced by many countries," said Madam Halimah.

The Republic has also achieved a high vaccination rate – 87 per cent of the population have been fully

MANAGED RESOURCES WISELY
 We did not have to borrow in order to help our people and businesses. In this way, we do not saddle our future generations with a debt burden, the situation faced by many countries.



PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB, who listed several high points of the year, adding that Singaporeans are fortunate that financial resources were managed wisely as the nation drew on past reserves for a number of support measures.

matter how much planning and preparation is done.

"No scientist or health expert has yet been able to predict or explain with great certainty what causes the pandemic to increase or decrease globally the way it does," said Madam Halimah.

"We should expect that there will be significant spread of the coronavirus, including new variants, and be prepared to deal with it."

She praised the solidarity of Singaporeans and paid tribute to donors, volunteers and social workers for ramping up efforts to help the needy.

She also thanked those on the front line who have worked selflessly to ensure the healthcare system functions well and transport networks run smoothly.

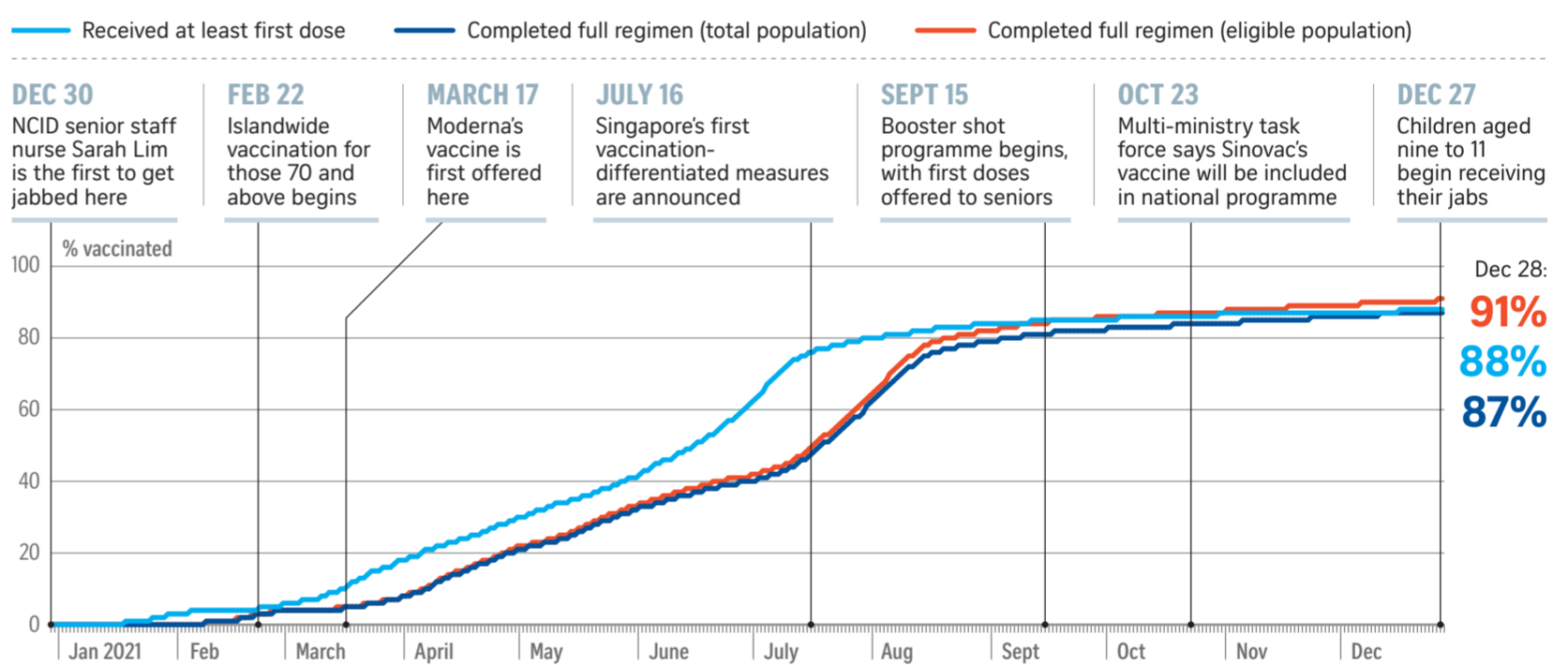
"As 2021 draws to a close, we can look back with satisfaction on the work done and look to 2022 with optimism," she said.

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S'pore marks one year since first Covid-19 vaccine jab

Giving vaccines a shot

On Dec 30 last year, a small group of healthcare workers received Singapore's first Covid-19 jabs. The Straits Times looks at the vaccination roll-out, one year on.



87% of population fully inoculated – one of world's highest rates; 39% have had booster

Timothy Goh

It has been one year since the first Covid-19 jab was administered here on Dec 30, 2020.

Since then, 87 per cent of the population here have been fully vaccinated, while 39 per cent have received their booster shot.

As at Tuesday, Singapore had one of the highest rates of fully vaccinated people in the world, according to the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford.

The nation's vaccination journey began months before the first shot was rolled out, in April last year.

At the time, a therapeutics and vaccines expert panel was created

to look for vaccine candidates around the globe.

In June last year, Singapore signed its first advance purchase agreement with Moderna.

But it was Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine that arrived first, in a shipment that landed at Changi Airport on Dec 21 that same year.

In a Facebook post that night, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said vaccination would be voluntary, but encouraged Singaporeans to take the vaccine.

"It's been a long and arduous year. I hope that this news will give Singaporeans cheer this festive season, and reason to be optimistic for 2021," he wrote.

After the first doses were given to 40 front-liners from the National Centre for Infectious Dis-

eases, vaccines began to be rolled out to the rest of the population.

Following a pilot programme for seniors in January, islandwide vaccination for those aged 70 and older commenced on Feb 22.

Announcing this on Feb 19, the Ministry of Health (MOH) emphasised that vaccination protects not only those taking the jab, but also those in the community who cannot be vaccinated owing to medical reasons.

"This collective protection will become more effective as more people are vaccinated and is a key enabler allowing us to return to normalcy," added MOH.

As more supplies of vaccines arrived, vaccination was gradually extended to other age groups over

the next few months.

The nation's high vaccination rates paid off when the Delta variant began spreading rapidly throughout the country.

Despite a surge in cases from September to last month, Singapore's overall death rate remained low – even lower than the rates in 2016, 2017 and 2018, before Covid-19 struck.

In a commentary in The Straits Times on Nov 6, Professor Teo Yik Ying, dean of the National University of Singapore's Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, and Professor Vernon Lee, senior director of MOH's Communicable Diseases Division, noted that Singapore was one of the most highly vaccinated countries in the world,

and that the boosters it rolled out had strengthened the protection against severe disease by at least 10 times, on top of the protection conferred by two doses.

"These steps have helped to avert many instances of infections and deaths, and made Singapore's Covid-19 death rate one of the lowest in the world," wrote the experts.

On Dec 14, the multi-ministry task force tackling Covid-19 here said vaccination-differentiated measures would be expanded to more places in the coming year, to protect the unvaccinated from severe illnesses.

It also said that at the end of next month, about 54 per cent of the population would have had their

booster shots, and that vaccination would be offered to children aged five to 11.

On Dec 27, this exercise kicked off for children from Primary 4 to Primary 6.

Minister for Trade and Industry Gan Kim Yong, who co-chairs the task force, said on Dec 14: "We are stepping up our booster programme to ensure that our population continues to be protected against severe outcomes."

"I would like to encourage those who are eligible to get your booster shot as soon as possible... (and) I urge those who are still not vaccinated yet, especially our seniors, not (to) wait any longer."

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Nurse who was first to get vaccine wanted to lead by example

Most people who get their Covid-19 vaccine shot in Singapore do so while accompanied by just one healthcare worker, and in some cases, a caregiver or loved one.

But when Ms Sarah Lim got her Pfizer-BioNTech jab, it was done under the scrutiny of about a dozen reporters and photographers.

One year ago, on Dec 30, the senior staff nurse at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) became the first person here to receive a dose of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Ms Lim, then 46, had been a healthcare worker for over 20 years and was no stranger to vaccinations, and was even excited about getting her first dose. "I was more nervous about the media attention than the injection," she said in an interview yesterday.

For most of last year, Covid-19 vaccines were only a glimmer on the horizon for many as the pan-

demical ravaged the globe.

But late last year, Ms Lim and her colleagues were told in a briefing that the vaccines would soon be available in Singapore.

In November last year, her nurse manager approached her and offered her the chance to be a part of history – as the first person here to get inoculated.

"I told her I'd do it. I wanted to take the lead and encourage others to get vaccinated," said Ms Lim.

Since her first shot in December, she has been jabbed two more times – in January and October – both times with Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine.

Being fully vaccinated has given her peace of mind to go about her regular activities, despite the surge in cases this year as well.

"It gave me confidence in my daily life, going to the gym, mingling with my gym friends when slots opened up. With my two doses, I felt very safe," said Ms Lim.

Since her first Covid-19 vaccination in December last year, Ms Sarah Lim has been jabbed two more times – in January and October – both times with Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine. Being fully vaccinated has given her peace of mind to go about her regular activities. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY



"I work in the healthcare industry, and I need to be healthy myself so I can care for my sick patients. A healthcare worker must be very healthy, so for me, vaccination is a must."

And despite a busy and difficult year, she received a spot of good news in October when she found out that her mother, who was initially hesitant to get vaccinated, had finally done so.

Recalling how she had shared her own experience with the jab to try and assuage her mother's fears, and spent months trying to talk her into it, Ms Lim said she was very happy when she heard the news.

"I told her, 'Good job!', I can be less worried now," she said, adding that her mother's friends and public messaging from the authorities had also played an important role.

Overall, Ms Lim said she was pleased with Singapore's efforts to get people vaccinated over the past year.

She added: "I hope that (next year), everyone in Singapore will go for their vaccination and boosters, so that life will go on."

Timothy Goh