

THE BIG STORY

Xi, Biden to get China-US relations back on track

Chinese President Xi Jinping and his US counterpart Joe Biden expressed the desire for their countries to work together to manage tensions and avoid conflict. They were meeting in person on Monday, the eve of the G-20 summit, for the first time since Mr Biden took office almost two years ago. **A1**

BUSINESS

HSBC sees Singapore as critical market: Group CEO

Banking heavyweight HSBC views Singapore as a critical market with key opportunities in corporate banking and wealth management, said group chief executive Noel Quinn. The bank aims to double its wealth business here by 2025. It is also targeting double-digit growth in its commercial banking business in Singapore. **A22**



The site of the future Jurong East Integrated Transport Hub, which will house Jurong Regional Library as well as a community club, a sports centre, offices and retail space. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

SINGAPORE

Jurong library getting new home at upcoming transport hub

Jurong Regional Library will be relocated to the upcoming Jurong East Integrated Transport Hub, which is slated for

completion in 2027. The hub will also house a community club, a sports centre, offices and retail space. The relocated library – expected to open in 2028 – will be more accessible and convenient, given its location beside Jurong East MRT station. **A14**

LIFE

A Singaporean in wallet-friendly Cape Town

Cape Town, South Africa, has echoes of other popular places. Its wine country evokes Tuscany, and its beaches have an Australian vibe. But Cape Town has its own merits. It is a world-class city with wallet-friendly prices that boasts international cuisine, vibrant art and landscapes teeming with wildlife. **C4&5**



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CAPE GRACE

INSIGHT

Eight high-profile layoffs by tech firms in 2022

Many tech companies have slashed jobs this year to curtail ambitions and brace themselves for tough times amid economic uncertainties, reversing their 10-year stock bull run. Check out this round-up of the layoffs announced by eight prominent technology firms in recent months. **B4**

SPORT

'Most physical' World Cup expected in Qatar

The 2022 World Cup, which kicks off on Sunday, is expected to be the "most physically competitive", said Mario Jovanovic, former conditioning coach for Croatia's national youth sides. The tournament is in the middle of the football season for the first time, hence players are fresher, he said. **B16**

Flaws in US study on Covid-19 reinfection posing higher risk: Experts

Study involving American veterans gave little information on underlying conditions

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

An American study suggesting that people who are infected with Covid-19 for a second time are at higher risk of organ failure and death is questionable, with inherent limitations and overstated conclusions,

say local experts.

The retrospective study by the Washington University School of Medicine and the Veterans Affairs (VA) St Louis Health Care System looked at nearly 41,000 VA patients who had two or more documented infections and 444,000 who were infected for the first time, out of a patient population of 5.8 million. Using statistical modelling, the

researchers concluded that patients with reinfections were twice as likely to die and three times more likely to be hospitalised than those infected for the first time.

Professor Ooi Eng Eong, an expert in emerging infectious diseases at Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore, said he was "appalled at how this study got through peer review" and was published in the *Nature Medicine* journal last week.

The study said those reinfected were 3.5 times more likely to develop lung problems and three times more likely to suffer heart condi-

tions. Prof Ooi pointed out that the study gave "very little information on what chronic diseases the cases with reinfection had".

Nor did it look at patients who had other respiratory infections to find out if the higher risk was Covid-19-specific or if any viral infection exacerbated their underlying chronic diseases.

Agreeing, Professor Paul Tambyah, a senior infectious diseases consultant at National University Hospital (NUH) and president-elect of the International Society for Infectious Diseases, said the study had major problems.

The reinfection and first-time-infected groups were very different. From the study data, those in the reinfected group were "three times more likely to be immunocompromised and nine times more likely to be in long-term care", he pointed out.

The absolute number who were reinfected was also very small – 41,000 out of 5.8 million veterans.

Prof Tambyah said: "It is hard to interpret the data and not possible to draw meaningful conclusions for any population outside of the VA."

He added that Singapore's experience is different. Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said in October that with the XBB wave, the reinfection rate here hit as high as 18 per cent. Dr Shawn Vasoo, clinical director

of the National Centre for Infectious Diseases, said local data from October to mid-November "does not suggest worsened clinical outcomes in reinfections compared with first-time infections".

The percentage of people who suffer from severe illness – requiring oxygen, in intensive care or dying – was 0.2 per cent for patients previously infected and 0.3 per cent for those getting an infection for the first time, he added.

Dr Vasoo said the patients in the VA study tended to be older male patients, with more who smoked or had serious medical problems, so the results might not apply to the general population.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases consultant at National University Hospital who also chairs the World Health Organisation's Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network steering committee, said the paper confuses association with causation.

He was referring to the statement that "the findings show that reinfection further increases risks of all-cause mortality and adverse health outcomes in both the acute and post-acute phases of reinfection".

He said: "People with disadvantage due to their socio-economic status inflicting health inequities are more likely to have risk factors and poor control of those risks.

They are also less likely to be able to avoid repeat infections. Because of their underlying health... they are more likely to die in the next six months, but it doesn't mean it is because of Covid-19."

But Prof Fisher also said the study sends a timely reminder that even at this stage of the pandemic, there is good reason to avoid Covid-19 infection.

Dr Vasoo said: "Vaccination protects against serious illness, for first and subsequent bouts of Covid-19. Reinfections are generally mild if you are vaccinated and remain up to date with your vaccinations."

salma@sph.com.sg

The reinfection and first-time-infected groups were very different. From the study data, those in the reinfected group were "three times more likely to be immunocompromised and nine times more likely to be in long-term care".

Guidelines also call for firms to implement flexible wage system

FROM A1

Lastly, employers that have not done well may exercise wage restraint, with the management leading by example. Lower-wage workers should get a built-in wage rise at the lower band of the 5.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent range of their gross monthly wage.

The guidelines for lower-wage workers apply to those who are earning a gross monthly wage of up to \$2,200, which covers about a fifth of full-time employed residents.

In coming up with the guidelines, the NWC noted that employees had taken wage cuts or freezes and supported other cost-cutting measures, and it said it is thus only fair that they are duly compensated when the economy picks up.

National Trades Union Congress president Mary Liew said "employers should recognise employees' contributions over the last two years, particularly those in the hardest-hit sectors, who may have taken wage cuts during the Covid-19 pandemic".

NTUC deputy secretary-general Desmond Tan urged employers to also factor in the current inflation rates when they make wage increment decisions so as "to ensure real income growth for our workers".

Inflation in Singapore is at its highest levels in over a decade, with headline inflation projected at 6 per cent for 2022, higher than the 2.3 per cent recorded in 2021. Core inflation, which excludes the costs of accommodation and private transport, is projected to average around 4 per cent, higher than the 0.9 per cent in 2021.

The guidelines, which cover the period from Dec 1 to Nov 30 next year, also called for employers to implement the flexible wage system if they have not done so. This is because economic uncertain-

ties ahead underscore the need for resilience and flexibility in wage structures, noted the NWC.

A flexible wage system includes a fixed component, which is the fixed basic monthly pay, and the variable component, which includes a monthly variable component or an annual variable component, built into the gross salary.

This will ensure employers can restore wages quickly when business recovers, or cut wages during periods of economic uncertainty. It also gives employees greater job security as companies can cut costs instead of jobs.

Mr Lim Wen Sheng, deputy general secretary of the Food, Drinks and Allied Workers Union, which represents employees in accommodation, food manufacturing, food retail and food services, said all companies should reward workers with a fair wage adjustment and variable payment to help them cope with rising inflation.

The NWC said that as wages pick up, productivity has to go up to justify the rise in wages, and while productivity has increased in the first half of 2022, employers should continue with business transformation and job redesign initiatives.

Labour productivity, as measured by real value-added per actual hours worked, has also improved by 1.5 per cent on a yearly basis in the first half of 2022.

Dr Robert Yap, president of the Singapore National Employers Federation, said the momentum of business transformation had accelerated during the pandemic.

Employers should push on to remain competitive, he said, adding that workers also have to upskill and reskill constantly and consistently to keep pace with the changes.

khiengchor@sph.com.sg



The National Wages Council has recommended a "fair and sustainable" rise in wages from Dec 1, 2022, to Nov 30, 2023. Companies are encouraged to beef up the flexible wage component of employees' pay to achieve this. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Businesses, HR experts welcome wage guide but say this should be backed by productivity growth

The Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (Asme) has welcomed the National Wages Council's (NWC) new wage guidelines, as the broad framework gives businesses the room to tailor implementation of the wage increases on a case-by-case basis.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) employ about 70 per cent of the workforce, according to a UOB report.

Mr Ang Yuit, vice-president of Asme, said that "as an association, we want to encourage the business owners to adopt the guidelines of flexible wages and implement what works for their business".

The NWC has recommended a "fair and sustainable" rise in wages for the period from Dec 1, 2022, to Nov 30, 2023.

To achieve this, companies are encouraged to beef up the flexible wage component of pay.

Lower-wage workers also get higher wage increments of 5.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent, or at least \$80 to \$100, up from the range of \$70 to \$80 in the past year's guidelines.

Dr David Leong, managing director of HR consulting firm Peopleworldwide Consulting, said employers should consider wage adjustments to retain workers and hire more.

He added that working on the monthly variable component is the most sensible way for companies to increase wages as it can be adjusted when times are difficult.

This ensures they do not lose their talents and, when the business environment picks up, "their

core team is intact and the rank and file are ready to run", he said.

Ms Tricia Liverpool, general manager of executive recruitment firm Cornerstone Global Partners, said employers should look at more regular salary reviews for high-performing employees and give bigger bonuses as a reward for productivity.

She said non-financial benefits are also important and "could include perks like hybrid working as an option for those who need it, more days off, improved healthcare plans and an investment on learning and development".

For lower-wage workers, like security guards, cleaners and landscape workers, the wage increase is also welcome.

Mr Toby Koh, group managing

director of security services company Ademco Security Group, said the security guard industry is facing a severe shortage of manpower and if salaries do not go up, it will not be able to attract better and younger talent into the trade.

"We are paying above-market rates. Let's not talk about the very new hires with no experience. With experienced staff, they are definitely getting above the market norms," he said.

As wages rise, the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) said this should be supported by productivity growth.

SNEF said real total wage growth, which include bonuses, was 2.7 per cent a year between 2016 and 2021.

During that period, productivity growth was 3.2 per cent per annum as wages grew at a slower pace, against the backdrop of a weaker economy.

Asme's Mr Ang said productivity has already been affected by the high manpower turnover SMEs are facing.

"There is a lot of movement in the job market. When you lose people, you need time to find and train people. We are seeing this in the last nine months, ever since opening up (after the pandemic)," he said.

To boost productivity, NWC said employers should continue with business transformation and job redesign initiatives.

Employees should also reskill and upskill to ensure their skills remain relevant in the current environment.

Ademco's Mr Koh said the industry is already using technology to boost productivity and trying to get clients to understand how technology can complement the physical security guards on site.

He said there are instances where technology can do a better job and there are instances when human judgment is still necessary. "Why do we still want guys to do endless patrols around our premises? Wouldn't computer vision actually be more efficient than human eyes?" he said.

But he added that when someone is seen loitering, a security officer would still need to go and chat with the person to assess if there is a threat.

Chor Khieng Yuit and Clara Chong