

Coronavirus Singapore, global situation

Many in S'pore set to go ahead with travel plans

Bus firms, agencies report no impact on sales or cancellations despite news of new virus variant

Malavika Menon and Nadine Chua

Travellers from Singapore making plans to visit countries under the Vaccinated Travel Lane (VTL) scheme remain undeterred and ready to push on with their arrangements despite the emergence of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

The new variant has been pinpointed to be behind the recent surge in infections in South Africa. On Saturday, the World Health Organisation labelled it a variant of concern as preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection with this variant.

Given that there are no disruptions so far to travel routes to Malaysia, Australia, Britain and countries in the European bloc,

many travellers and players in the travel sector here are adopting a wait-and-see approach as more information on the variant emerges.

Housewife Ku Xie Mei, 43, is going ahead with her trip to her home town in Malaysia on Dec 7 despite her concerns about the Omicron variant.

"I have not been to Melaka for two years now, and although I am worried about the new variant, I have to visit my mother as she has been diagnosed with end-stage lung cancer and liver failure," said Ms Ku, a Singapore citizen.

She will be flying to Kuala Lumpur with her son, and hopes to spend 15 days with her mother.

There have been no reports of Omicron being detected in Malaysia so far, although in the Asia-Pacific, the variant has been detected in Hong Kong and Australia.

Singapore bus company Transtar – one of two bus operators designated to carry out trips under the Singapore-Malaysia land VTL – told The Straits Times that ticket sales yesterday were not impacted by news of the new

Covid-19 variant.

Demand for bus tickets has been about the same since last Thursday, the first day that tickets went on sale, a spokesman said, but declined to share sales figures.

Handal Indah, the Malaysian bus company operating the same route, said it has sold over 20,000 bus tickets since sales began last Thursday – about 16,000 for trips from Singapore to Malaysia, and 6,000 in the other direction.

"We did not experience a decrease in demand on Sunday as people are still progressively booking their tickets," the firm said.

Travel agencies here said they did not receive calls or requests for cancellations yesterday from customers due to travel soon.

Mr Jeremiah Wong, senior marketing and communications manager at Chan Brothers Travel, said it had not heard of any concerns from customers booked for Europe VTL package tours.

"We have received a couple of calls from customers booked on our Australia package tours due to the change in quarantine requirements by the Australian authori-

ties," he said.

Australia announced on Saturday that vaccinated international travellers to the states of New South Wales and Victoria must self-isolate for at least 72 hours in the light of the new variant.

Scot said it had no confirmed cancellations of flights as at 4pm yesterday.

Singapore Airlines and Scoot also said there were no changes to their flight schedules to Malaysia, Australia, Britain or Europe at present.

A Scoot spokesman said: "As more information is needed on the transmissibility and implications of the Covid-19 Omicron variant, we are unable to comment on its impact at this early stage."

One traveller who is uncertain about her plans is Ms Joyce Tan, 62, who was making arrangements to travel to the United States to visit her brother in mid-December.

"It's a totally different environment that we're travelling in now, with a lot more arrangements that have to be made... Since I have made all these arrangements, I will avoid withdrawing from the trip voluntarily," said Ms Tan, a secretary.

She added: "Even before the Omicron variant was discovered, when I booked my flight, I was prepared that I would have to drop all my travel plans if the VTL was closed."

mmala@sph.com.sg
nadinechua@sph.com.sg

Additional reporting by Ng Keng Gene

PCR test should be able to detect Omicron, says NCID

Nadine Chua

A lot of urgent work needs to be done to further understand the new coronavirus variant Omicron, said the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) yesterday.

It added that although Omicron emerged recently, a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test should still detect cases of the variant.

In response to queries from The Straits Times, an NCID spokesman said: "There remains a lot of urgent work to be done to further understand this variant. This includes transmissibility, diagnostics, clinical manifestations, disease severity, acquired immunity from vaccine or natural infection, and others."

He added that NCID will continue to monitor and collaborate internationally to further its understanding of this new variant of concern.

Omicron, or the B.1.1.529 strain of the coronavirus, was designated a variant of concern by the World Health Organisation last Friday.

Seen as possibly more contagious, it was first detected in South Africa on Nov 11, and has also been found in Botswana and Hong Kong.

In recent days, Singapore and other countries have restricted travel from southern Africa amid concerns over the Omicron strain.

nadinechua@sph.com.sg

Covid-19: Latest update (Nov 28)

New cases
747

Locally transmitted
744

Imported cases
3

(Community & dorms)

Total cases **262,383**

In hospitals **1,147**

Total deaths **701**

Daily adult ICU bed usage

Total: **392**
Unoccupied: **167**
Occupied: **225**

Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 cases

Percentage of people fully vaccinated:

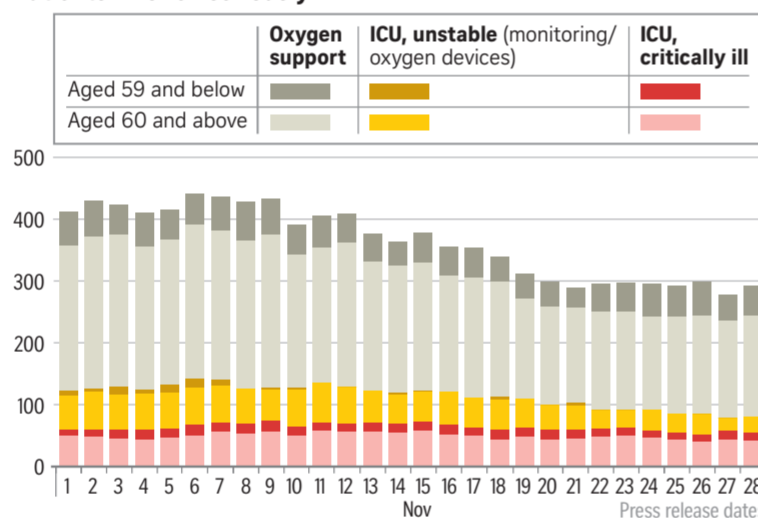
85%

Source: MINISTRY OF HEALTH

Local cases detected in the last 28 days by severity of condition

Required oxygen: 538
ICU unstable: 78
ICU critically ill: 81
Deceased: 141

Patients who fell seriously ill



Ratio of community cases in the past week to those in the week before

NOTE: A figure of more than 1 indicates that case numbers are growing

Nov 28: 0.69

747 new cases – figure under 1,000 for first time since Sept 20

Wong Shiying

There were 747 new Covid-19 infections yesterday, down from 1,761 on Saturday and falling below the 1,000 mark for the first time since Sept 20.

The Covid-19 weekly infection growth rate was 0.69, down from 0.75 on Saturday, said the Ministry of Health (MOH) in its daily update.

This is the 16th day in a row that the growth rate has been below one. The number refers to the ratio of community cases in the past week over the week before.

A weekly infection growth rate that is consistently below one shows that the number of new weekly Covid-19 cases is falling.

The intensive care unit (ICU) utilisation rate was at 57.4 per cent yesterday, up from 56.6 per cent on Saturday.

There were 11 people aged between 67 and 98 who died of com-

plications linked to Covid-19, MOH said.

All of them had various underlying medical conditions, it added, without giving further details.

The latest deaths take the total number of fatalities in Singapore to 701.

The new infections comprised 719 cases in the community, 25 in migrant worker dormitories and three imported cases.

Of the community cases, 135 were seniors aged 60 and above.

The total number of cases in Singapore now stands at 262,383.

In the last 28 days, 98.7 per cent of local infected cases were asymptomatic or had mild symptoms, 0.8 per cent required oxygen supplementation in the general ward, and 0.1 per cent were unstable and under close monitoring in the ICU to prevent further deterioration.

About 0.1 per cent had been critically ill and intubated in the ICU, which means they needed ventilators to help them breathe.

Among the clusters under close

monitoring is Pacific Healthcare Nursing Home near Jalan Bukit Merah, with nine new cases that take its total to 44.

Three new cases were added to the Econ Healthcare Nursing Home in Chai Chee, bringing its tally to 41.

As at last Friday, 85 per cent of the population have completed the full vaccination regimen or taken two doses of the vaccines, and 25 per cent have taken booster shots.

MOH said: "Seniors 60 years old and above, especially if unvaccinated, continue to be more adversely affected by Covid-19."

sywong@sph.com.sg

The Covid-19 weekly infection growth rate was 0.69, down from 0.75 on Saturday, said the Ministry of Health in its daily update. This is the 16th day in a row that the growth rate has been below one.

S. Africa decries travel bans, says it is being punished for discovering variant

JOHANNESBURG • South Africa, whose citizens have suddenly become persona non grata around the world after the discovery of a new Covid-19 variant in the country, says it is being "punished" and unfairly treated for sounding the alarm.

The government in the country worst hit by the pandemic on the continent, is seething over the stigma it is suffering for being the bearer of bad news.

The decision by many countries around the world to ban flights from parts of Africa following the discovery of the variant, named Omicron, "is akin to punishing South Africa for its advanced genomic sequencing and the ability to detect new variants quicker", the Foreign Affairs Ministry said in a statement.

"Excellent science should be applauded and not punished," it added. "New variants have been detected in other countries. Each of those cases have had no recent links with southern Africa", yet the global "reaction to those countries is starkly different to cases in southern Africa".

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has cautioned against imposing travel restrictions due to Omicron.

South Africa's Health Ministry slammed the travel restrictions as "draconian" and "misdirected" measures which go "against the norms and advice by the WHO".



Said Health Minister Joe Phaahla: "We feel some of the leadership of countries are finding scapegoats to deal with what is a worldwide problem."

Pretoria fears the border closures will hurt "families, the travel and tourism sector, businesses", and that it may deter other countries from reporting discoveries of future variants for fear of being ostracised and punished.

"Sometimes one gets punished for being transparent, and doing

things very quick," said Dr Tulio de Oliveira, a leading virologist who announced the discovery of the Omicron variant.

Dr Ahmed Omgwell, deputy director at the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), added his disgust.

"Stop this unscientific knee-jerk travel bans against #Africa. Use evidence for #covid19pandemic – public health measures, testing, vaccines," he tweeted, adding that travel bans were politics. "Politics



Above: The check-in area for international flights was deserted at O.R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg yesterday as several airlines stopped flying out of South Africa following the discovery of the Omicron variant. Left: A woman on the phone trying to get a flight out of Johannesburg yesterday. South Africa's Health Ministry slammed the travel restrictions imposed against travellers from parts of Africa as "draconian" and "misdirected". PHOTOS: REUTERS

won't solve pandemics."

A South African doctor who had raised the alarm over Omicron said yesterday that dozens of her patients suspected of having the new variant had shown only mild symptoms and recovered fully without hospitalisation.

Dr Angeliqe Coetzee, chair of the South African Medical Association, told Agence France-Presse that she had seen around 30 patients over the past 10 days who tested positive for Covid-19 but

had unfamiliar symptoms.

"What brought them to the surgery was this extreme tiredness," she said, speaking from Pretoria, where she practises. She noted this was unusual for younger patients.

Most were men under 40. Just under half were vaccinated. They also had mild muscle aches, a "scratchy throat" and dry cough, she said. Only a few had a slightly high temperature. These very mild symptoms were different from those

seen with other variants, which caused more severe symptoms.

Dr Coetzee alerted health officials to a "clinical picture that doesn't fit Delta" – South Africa's dominant variant – on Nov 18, when she received the first seven of her 30-odd patients.

"We are not saying that there will not be severe disease coming forward," she said. But "for now, even the patients that we have seen who are not vaccinated have mild symptoms". AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE