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To: Arun Rohilla
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Singapore

Vaccine safety concerns to pose key risk to herd immunity target; operational constraints to persist

 OPERATIONAL LABOUR

COVID-19

The Ministry of Health (MOH) on 18 February said that a 72-year-old Singaporean who received his first COVID-19 vaccine dose was hospitalised after suffering a cardiac arrest.

There are no indications that the government is facing any severe risks of vaccine supply disruption, which will mitigate risks of shortages and significant vaccination delays in 2021.

However, recent surveys suggest that vaccine safety concerns are considerably widespread, which indicates that the government is unlikely to succeed in securing herd immunity by September.

As Singapore has not made COVID-19 vaccinations compulsory, businesses will need to manage potential tensions that could emerge from differing employee views on the need for vaccination.

Side effects

The MOH said that trained healthcare personnel had assessed the patient to be suitable for the vaccination. The MOH cited the hospital's initial assessment that there was no indication that the jab caused the cardiac arrest but said that the hospital was conducting further tests to determine the cause. The MOH is unlikely to alter its stance of offering COVID-19 vaccinations to residents aged 70 years and above based on the latest case.

The government had reported four cases of anaphylaxis (the rapid onset of severe allergic reactions) among the more than 155,000 people who had received at least the first of two doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine as of 1 February. The four individuals were discharged from hospital after less than two days and none needed intensive care.

Vaccine safety

The government is relying primarily on the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines and received the first shipment of the latter on 17 February. There are no indications that reported supply delays for both vaccines in other parts of the world are likely to seriously affect the timeline of shipments to Singapore.

Despite the very low proportion of cases involving severe vaccination side effects, surveys from December 2020 indicate that there are considerably widespread concerns about vaccine safety among the local population. These indicators suggest that the country is unlikely to achieve herd immunity by September, which is when the government hopes to complete vaccination for the entire eligible population.

Although a survey commissioned by local newspaper *The Straits Times* in early December 2020 indicated that eight in ten respondents would want to receive a COVID-19 vaccination, subsequent surveys by other institutions have proved less positive. An online survey conducted by researchers at a local university found that only 55.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they would be inoculated when the vaccine becomes available in Singapore. Nearly a quarter believed that the COVID-19 vaccine could alter the human DNA. In January 2021, online news portal AsiaOne found in an informal survey that 60% of respondents were unwilling or hesitant to take the vaccine, while global online analytics firm YouGov found that 47% of respondents were most likely to take the vaccine.

The government has not made COVID-19 vaccinations compulsory, which means that businesses will need to manage potential divergences in views among employees on the need for vaccination and the implications on operations, such as whether there is a need for split teams between those who are vaccinated and those who are not. Medical experts, human resource practitioners and business associations told *The Straits Times* in end-2020 that employers are unlikely to mandate inoculation among their workforces.

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