

Vaccine hesitancy 'no big deal' in Covid-19 fight – expert

Malaysiakini

16 October 2020

COVID-19 | As the world eagerly waits for an effective vaccine to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, public health expert Dr Lokman Hakim Abdullah says vaccine hesitancy in Malaysia will not be a major factor.

Although vaccine hesitancy will always be a challenge, Lokman said, Malaysia's childhood vaccination programmes are doing fine.

“As far as Malaysia is concerned, I think we are not that bad. Looking at our childhood immunisation programmes, we are still doing fine.

“But, of course, the challenges are always there. We will continue to face that kind of obstacle in this country. I don't think that is a big issue,” he said in an interview with Astro Awani's “Consider This” segment last night.

Lokman's comments came just weeks after a survey found signs of high levels of vaccine hesitancy in Malaysia.

In the survey published by the Pew Research Centre on Sept 29, only 52 percent of respondents in Malaysia rated childhood vaccines as having “high” preventive health benefits, compared to 34 percent who rated “medium” and 14 percent who responded with “low” or “none”.

The survey also found that 27 percent of the Malaysian respondents believe childhood vaccines have “high” risks of side effects, compared with 40 percent who rated the risks as “medium” and 32 percent who rated “low” or none.

“Malaysia is among the survey publics least likely to rate the preventive health benefits as high and to rate the risk of side effects as low,” the pollster said in its report.

The survey studied public attitudes towards science in 20 countries across the world, and was conducted from October 2019 to March 2020.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2019 had identified vaccine hesitancy as the biggest global public health threat at the time, as it threatened to undermine decades of progress in public health.

Meanwhile, Lokman - a former Health Ministry deputy director-general in charge of public health - said Malaysia should consider both the Covax vaccine access

initiative and cutting deals with individual countries to purchase vaccines.

He said despite the high cost of joining the Covax initiative, it is still likely to be the best deal because it has the combine purchasing power of several countries, which allows them to purchase vaccines in bulk and negotiate for a lower price.

“By logic, if you pool up the countries and you have the bulk purchase, then you get a better deal. At least when you have multiple vaccines in your portfolio, if one doesn't work you have other alternatives.

“If you are depending on one bilateral negotiation (to acquire vaccines from one country), what if the vaccine doesn't work?

“So, what I'm trying to say is, I think the government needs to consider both. They have to weigh all the alternatives, look at both mechanisms.

“Of course, if the government can get a good bilateral deal with any producer, by all means, that's good,” Lokman added in the interview.

The Covax facility is co-led by the Gavi Alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and WHO.

It aims to pool the resources of many countries to accelerate the development and manufacture of Covid-19 vaccines, as well as ensure equitable access to the drug for every country.

However, critics have balked at the high cost and lack of transparency in the initiative.

According to Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, Malaysia would have to fork out RM42 million just to join the Covax facility and pay another RM600 million to source about three million doses when it becomes available.

The figure would only cover less than 10 percent of Malaysia's population, which may protect individuals who receive the vaccine but is far from adequate for providing herd immunity to slow the spread of the disease.

Muhyiddin has indicated Malaysia will join the initiative, but Gavi's website shows Malaysia has yet to sign the Covax commitment agreement as of Oct 14.

Malaysia has also been negotiating with China to acquire vaccines from the republic, and Muhyiddin has said China has agreed to list Malaysia as a priority recipient of the vaccine when it completes its clinical trials.

Malaysia has also set up a special committee co-chaired by Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Khairy Jamaluddin and Health Minister Dr Adham Baba to ensure Malaysia's access to vaccines.

However, Lokman said vaccines should not be seen as a silver bullet to stop the pandemic but as only one of several strategies at play.

“Like any other health issue, we cannot just be dependent on one strategy.

“We have to use whatever strategy that is available, and if a vaccine that is safe and efficacious is available, and affordable, then why not? We should use it together with other public health strategies,” he added.

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd

Source: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/546746>