Be prepared for H1N1 to spread, says Khaw

Infected patients doing well; scientific team assembled to monitor evolution of virus

BY LEE HUI CHIEH & JUDITH TAN

NOW that the new flu strain has entered Singapore, it will spread, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan said yesterday.

After five weeks in the clear, the number of patients infected by the new influenza A (H1N1) strain here jumped from one on Wednesday to four yesterday.

All the cases, however, are unconnected.

Said Mr Khaw: “If we can help it, we should try to contain it.

“But I am mentally prepared, knowing the nature of influenza, that it’s really very hard to contain. As you can see, all four cases slipped through the border because at the point when they crossed the temperature scanner, they did not have fever.”

All four patients contracted the flu overseas.

So far, the Health Ministry’s (MOH’s) flu surveillance shows no sign that it is spreading within Singapore.

The ministry said yesterday that the patients had “relatively mild symptoms, are doing well and are expected to recover uneventfully”.

The 31 people, including 13 Singaporeans, who were quarantined after being in close contact with them are also faring well.

Six of them had received their home quarantine orders yesterday.

Even if the virus begins circulating here, the flu pandemic alert level, which is currently at yellow, need not be raised, and may be lowered, as long as the bug remains mild and does not kill significantly more people, Mr Khaw said.

“The key point is the nature of the virus. Is it the virus lethal, or like ordinary influenza? The focus should no longer be on the numbers infected. To me, the numbers are academic,” he added.

To monitor any development in the virus, a key team of scientists from the public health sector and the Genome Institute of Singapore (GIS) is being assembled.

Headed by MOH’s director of medical services, Professor K. Satku, it will study viral samples from the four patients to see if they match those overseas, or whether they have mutated. It will then track these local viral samples over time for mutations.

Mr Khaw said that if at the end of this study “we can confirm that indeed, this H1N1 is behaving just like any other seasonal flu, then we can seriously consider lowering many of the control measures we have put in place, such as contact tracing and home quarantine orders.”

The time for the study will depend on the number of patients here, he said. Once the team is confident that the virus is truly mild, the alert level could be lowered to green, he said.

The “trigger for alarm” to raise the alert level to orange should be only if the virus has mutated into a deadly form.

The scientific community here is excited at getting local samples of the new flu strain, said GIS executive director Edison Liu.

Two groups are working on the virus, he said.

One is a national team of scientists and clinicians led by Prof Satku and Professor John Wong, dean of the National University of Singapore’s Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

The other is a smaller group of scientists from the Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*Star) working with counterparts in Mexico on sequencing the H1N1 virus.

Said Prof Liu: “We had been dealing with the older flu samples. With the current virus, we would have a better understanding of the changes of its genome here. The big concern is a dramatic change in its behaviour.”

Working with biotechnology firm Roche NimbleGen, GIS scientists have developed a method which allows them to amplify the genomes of influenza A viruses and sequence them within a day.

This can help scientists diagnose any possible new variant and monitor for early signs of resistance to Tamiflu.

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