

'A lot of uncertainty' over duration of protection from COVID-19 vaccines: Lawrence Wong

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There is a lot of uncertainty both over the duration of protection following COVID-19 vaccination and whether those who have received the injections can still transmit the virus, said Education Minister Lawrence Wong on Monday (25 January).

While early data from some countries such as Israel suggest promising results from vaccination, Singapore will “still need time to look at all of these critical unknowns and to resolve them,” cautioned Wong, who co-chairs the multi-ministry task force tackling the pandemic.

And there may also be setbacks: for example, initial research suggests that current vaccines may be less effective against the South African variant of the virus, he noted in a speech at an Institute of Policy Studies conference.

“In the worst case, we end up always a step behind the evolving virus and we will not be able to catch up in time,” he said. “So there are still tremendous uncertainties ahead of us and the bottom line is that we live in a shared world and no one is safe until everyone is safe.”

Noting that the pandemic will end at some point, Wong said the many unknowns mean that it may take four to five years for the pandemic to end and the post-COVID normal to start.

Still, no one can tell how the world will look like then. “Let us think of this crisis as setting the stage for a software update – a ‘reboot’ of sorts after the tremendous damage inflicted by the virus,” said Wong.

Three ‘resets’

In his speech, Wong highlighted three “resets” Singapore must make: creating a fairer and more equal society; a greener Singapore; and a stronger spirit of solidarity.

Firstly, the pandemic has widened the gap between the haves and have-nots, and there is added impetus to strengthen the social support system, he said.

“So there will be a permanent shift towards further strengthening of our social safety nets, to protect the disadvantaged and vulnerable, and we will have to work out how this will be sustainable over the longer term. The bottom line is that we aim to give Singaporeans more assurance in an uncertain post-COVID world.”

Noting the need for a wide range of abilities and aptitudes for societies to thrive ranging from artisans and technicians to artists and those doing care jobs, Wong added that a broader mindset change is needed so that merit is not narrowly defined by academic abilities.

“If we attach more value in terms of prestige and income to people who excel across a wide range of fields and not just cognitively, incomes would naturally spread out more evenly across society, and we will go a long way in advancing our cause towards a fairer and more equal society,” he added.

Secondly, climate change will be the “existential emergency of our time” and Singapore must build a greener economy and society that is more environmentally sustainable, said Wong, who is also Second Minister for Finance.

Sustainability can open up new opportunities for growth and jobs, he said. “There is potential for Singapore to be a carbon trading and services hub in Asia, for example in areas like sustainability consultancy, verification, carbon credits trading, and risk management,” he added.

Finally, strengthening Singapore’s social compact will enable the country to thrive, said Wong. A silver lining from the pandemic is that it can be an opportunity to strengthen Singapore’s social solidarity, Wong pointed out.

“Because we are forced to reflect deeply on our own values, we develop a more acute sense of shared memories and common destiny. We go through difficulties together, and we forge a stronger sense of group solidarity and social cohesion.”

Citing broad initiatives such as Emerging Stronger Conversations, SG Youth Action Plan, and ‘Alliances for Action’, Wong said the government is creating more opportunities for citizens and stakeholders to be part of policy-making and implementation.