

Preparing for the next pandemic

Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud

Department of Social & Preventive Medicine, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur

ABSTRACT

Summary: Despite COVID-19 being the most severe pandemic to afflict the world since the Spanish Flu of 1918, the Malaysian response has not been outstanding even among developing nations. Pandemic preparation is a national responsibility, and the current Pandemic Preparedness Plan needs to be revised and updated if the country is to prepare properly for another pandemic. It has also become clear that the country needs to go beyond merely revising the Pandemic Preparedness Plan. Indeed, opportunities abound for a reset of the economy and the country in many ways. This reset is a great opportunity to push for widespread automation and adoption of artificial intelligence in the Malaysian economy, adoption of E- in work and life, introduction of a more efficient food supply chain, delivery of education through alternative means and to have vaccines and medicines security. In addition, future pandemic preparedness must heed lessons learned during this pandemic and use a whole-of-community approach in its planning. There is a great need to recognise the combined threats of unsustainable healthcare financing, climate change, the rise in lifestyle diseases, an ageing population and rapidly spreading infectious diseases which must be tackled and included in any future planning. Public health education also needs to change as pandemic resilience is not usually part of the usual public health curriculum. The link between infections and non-communicable diseases needs to be bridged and more research needs to be carried out to understand this link better. Public health education also needs to incorporate adaptive thinking and scaling up response at speed and health promotion needs to adapt to social media and to counter misinformation. Advocacy for change is no longer a luxury or an option. It needs to happen quickly, and the country needs to adapt and innovate. If it fails to adapt and innovate then risks will emerge, it will be left further behind, and Malaysia will be even less prepared for another catastrophic health event.