Lest fatigue sets in ...

Step down from Orange to Yellow to conserve resources for big battle possibly ahead: Khaw

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JUST one week ago, the world braced for a devastating enemy thought to be as deadly as Sars. Influenza A (H1N1) was suspected to have claimed 159 lives and infected nearly 2,500 more. Singaporeans, especially healthcare workers, braced for the blow as the country moved to Orange alert.

Fast-forward to today. No H1N1 infections have turned up in Singapore, yet. Globally, just 1,490 cases have proven to involve the virus — and the confirmed death toll? Thirty.

Good news though is that the new virus strain has been milder than first thought, this situation presents a problem — that of “flu fatigue”, in Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan’s words.

“When they (medical staff) see no patients but if it’s just a decree from us — ‘please do all these, high alert 24 hours, all your leave is cancelled, June holidays, say sorry to your kids’ — I think that is difficult.

“And when it is difficult, and people begin to ignore it, that is when trouble will start. When you really need to upgrade to Red-1, people will say, ‘No, it’s not true, it’s probably not necessary.”’

So it is that from today, the country will start scaling down its disease outbreak alert status, to gradually hit Yellow on Monday, if matters continue as they are.

Stressing that this was not a signal that Singapore is “out of the woods”, Mr Khaw said easing up now on the measures would avoid fatigue and conserve valuable resources “for the big battle which may come” — the winter flu season, six months away.

Were there clinical signs of the need to stay on Orange alert for the next six months, Singaporeans would take it in stride, he said. But not when there

MOVING FROM ORANGE TO YELLOW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT WILL CHANGE</th>
<th>Current (Orange)</th>
<th>From today</th>
<th>From Monday (Yellow)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HOSPITALS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Full personal protective equipment</td>
<td>In patient contact areas</td>
<td>Only in high-risk areas, eg ICU, A&amp;E</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Visitor restrictions</td>
<td>1 per patient</td>
<td>2 per patient at any time</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Patient transfers</td>
<td>Only between linked restructured hospitals and nursing homes</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>Restriction lifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Medical students</td>
<td>Clinical postings on hold</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>To be resumed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BORDER HEALTH CONTROLS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Travellers from affected areas except Mexico</td>
<td>Stay home if possible and monitor own health</td>
<td>Monitor own health, go on with normal activities; if unwell, call 993</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IN THE COMMUNITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Workplaces, schools, buildings, events</td>
<td>Screening for temperature, flu-like symptoms and travel history for visitors; twice daily temperature taking for staff</td>
<td>Lifted</td>
<td>No Change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHAT WON’T CHANGE**

- Non-urgent elective surgeries postponed
- Movement of patients inter-hospital restricted to medically-indicated transfers only
- Contact tracing for confirmed, probable cases
- Home Quarantine Order for travellers returning from Mexico
- Temperature screening for inbound travellers at checkpoints

*PENDING REVIEW ON SUNDAY
is “strong evidence that it may not be necessary”.

Even if today, a small infection cluster does surface “and the cases seem mild”, a Yellow alert would still be appropriate, Mr Khaw clarified. As of yesterday, 12 home quarantine orders had been issued on locals and foreigners who had recently been in Mexico; two were to have ended their quarantine at midnight.

But why downgrade Singapore’s alert level, when the World Health Organization (WHO) has not moved its alert status of 5, one step short of a pandemic indicator?

Or was it a case of Singapore having overreacted when it bumped up its alert Orange prematurely? Not at all, said Mr Khaw. “For your public health measures to be of any effect, it must be quick, it must be over-reactive. You must not under-react. (But) you cannot over-react forever, then you cause ‘cry-wolf’.”

**ALERT SYSTEMS NOT THE SAME**

Clarifying how the WHO’s alert phases operated, Dr Lyn James, director of the Communicable Diseases Department, describes the spread of disease across the world and does not take into account severity — unlike Singapore’s disease outbreak alert system, which looks at the virus’ nature and severity.

As such, both alert levels need not follow in tandem.

Given how little was known of the new H1N1 strain when it first surfaced, “when you do not know how it will hit, and who it will hit”, said Mr Khaw, it was natural to “lockstep” with the WHO.

But a clearer picture has since emerged of the virus and how it has affected this region. Hence, it makes sense for the alert level to reflect the local situation, said Mr Khaw, who will suggest to WHO that it tweak its pandemic phase system as its current six levels are “limited”.

And the Government is right to ease off the alert status until more data is available, said avian flu researcher Steven Ney.

**Sars was not very infectious but deadly. It’s like a big elephant. It is easier to spot and ... you try to shoot it and kill it with an elephant gun. H1N1 is not the same. It’s like locusts that come once in a while, and thousands of them. You can try to kill them with elephant guns but it’s not possible.**

Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan

“It is very difficult to keep a society, even one as disciplined as Singapore’s, mobilised at such a high level for a prolonged period,” said the associate professor at the Singapore Management University’s School of Social Sciences.

“What is more, it is vitally important that the people in Singapore retain their trust and confidence in the authorities dealing with the pandemic threat. Downgrading the alert shows people that the authorities are paying attention to developments and are on top of things...”

“After all, when the next, possibly less benign wave of H1N1 hits, we want people to be alert and cooperating with a system that they have confidence in,” he told TODAY.

**BIG ROLE OF PERSONAL HYGIENE**

Mr Khaw said he was “impressed” with how Singaporeans had responded this past week — without panic, and taking the inconvenience in stride — and called on them to maintain personal hygiene even as the alert level is stepped down.

In fact, compared to Sars, personal hygiene is even more important and the public plays a much bigger role than hospital staff in the war against H1N1.

The authorities and hospitals will continue to be vigilant, as we still “do not have full information” about the disease.

“Even our switch to yellow takes a few days, slowly, and gives us a few days to judge the situation,” he said.

What of companies and Singaporeans who have rushed out to equip themselves with thermal scanners and thermometers?

At the same time, Mr Khaw noted, there were others frantically looking for thermometers, realising they needed to have a plan. “I won’t call it a wasted effort at all. Those are valuable experiences that we hope will stick for a long time,” he said — especially if the next outbreak “may not be so kind”.

“We have now been warned twice, first through Sars (deadly but not contagious), now H1N1 (contagious but not deadly). The next outbreak may be both contagious and deadly,” he said.