

## Battling an invisible enemy

By Wong Kiew Moi

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*The Covid-19 pandemic that has taken the world by surprise with its appalling scale and reach has left behind devastating consequences no lesser than that of warfare as we continue to fight a battle against an unseen enemy without firearms, but with the medical fraternity forming the first line of defence.*

Most, if not all, nations have long been preoccupied with boosting economic growth and fortifying military reserves as benchmarks of development. Yet, are we investing enough resources in public health systems and their related infrastructure? This pandemic serves as a wake-up call to governments worldwide to take heed of the devastating consequences of inadequate support for healthcare establishments, as reflected in not only the escalating number of infected patients and the rising death toll, but also the resulting series of socioeconomical concerns that leave an impact no less calamitous than the destruction caused by warfare.

At the 2015 TED conference in Vancouver, Canada, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates cautioned, “If anything kills over 10 million people in the next few decades, it’s most likely to be a highly infectious virus rather than a war. Not missiles, but microbes. Now, part of the reason for this is that we’ve invested a huge amount in nuclear deterrents. But we’ve actually invested very little in a system to stop an epidemic. We’re not ready for the next epidemic.”

Gates has expressed an early interest in vaccine development even before the onset of the Covid-19 outbreak. In 2005, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation pledged US\$750mil

(approximately RM3.3bil) to the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation for vaccine research purposes.

### Treading on unfamiliar territory

As more countries fall prey to the Covid-19 pandemic, are Malaysians prepared to deal with the unprecedented scale of the contagion as a nation?

“Malaysia’s total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases is around 7,000, which is within the capacity of our national healthcare system. Hospitals have prepared 6,000 beds for Covid-19 patients, in addition to 200 to 300 beds in ICU wards,” explained Datuk Prof. Dr. Awang Bulgiba Awang Mahmud, a physician who serves in Universiti Malaya’s Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, during our interview. As Malaysia’s daily number of infections reaches a plateau, the burden on our healthcare system has gradually eased. Nevertheless, Prof. Awang Bulgiba cautioned, “We still have to be alert, as the pandemic is far from over.”

Furthermore, Prof. Awang Bulgiba raised concerns over the difficulties of obtaining accurate Covid-19 statistics from two groups: migrant workers and refugees. Our country’s workforce is fairly dependent on migrant labour

and refugees, who live in cramped quarters and lack access to balanced nutrition, positioning them as a high-risk group susceptible to infection. Moreover, migrant workers without work permits and refugees tend to flee from one place to another to evade prosecution from the authorities, placing them at a greater risk of contracting and transmitting the virus. These migrant communities are scattered across the country and are expected to return to work following the easing of MCO restrictions. Hence, we should exercise caution to prevent another wave of infections.

“We need to think of ways to implement stricter testing. Migrant workers with work permits are eligible for testing in accordance with the stipulated protocol, while non-profit organizations are able to help by encouraging migrant workers without work permits and refugees, especially refugees who have been residing in the country for a prolonged duration, to undergo testing, as non-profit organizations have long been engaging with and gaining the trust of these groups,” opined Prof. Awang Bulgiba, who also proposed the idea of establishing an agency specializing in the monitoring and prevention of epidemics and pandemics within the country. He elaborated that the Ministry of Health (MOH) has already been tasked with managing numerous agencies and many other duties, in addition to leading the nation’s Covid-19 responses. Moreover, the MOH is treading on uncharted territory in terms of infection-control strategies.

“We were admittedly less organized during the initial stage of the Covid-19 outbreak. To be fair, Malaysia has mostly been observing from the sidelines when various epidemics emerged in other parts of the world. Even if an epidemic reached our shores, the number of infections

was low. Hence, we’re inexperienced in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic,” the professor revealed, at the same time highlighting the urgent need for epidemic preparedness efforts.

### **Future concerns**

Prof. Awang Bulgiba observed that despite the initial shortcomings, we eventually managed to overcome our inadequacies with the cooperation of all parties involved. For instance, local tertiary institutions were roped in to provide support in terms of equipment and manpower and testing kits were acquired from abroad to meet growing demand for Covid-19 testing. “Malaysia has to strengthen its implementation of precautionary measures against epidemics. Although we’re powerless in stopping an epidemic, we have the option to prepare ourselves better for future outbreaks, while fostering closer collaboration with other countries in the public health sector,” he advised, before adding, “Presently, we have promising local researchers working on vaccine development, but we lack facilities and funding. This dilemma is worth taking into consideration for future progress.”

Towards the end of the interview, the professor expressed his hope for the Malaysian government to work on identifying and consolidating areas that require improvement for the benefit of the people.

Will Malaysia be able to leverage on its abundant natural resources and efforts in science, technology and innovation to invest in building a comprehensive epidemic prevention system to meet international standards and foster exchanges with other countries? As Malaysians, our strength lies in our unity – setting aside our differences and coming together as one to fight the pandemic.