

Bosses up their guard against Omicron variant

By YUEN MEIKENG

FOCUS

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Staying safe: Working from home is one of the prevention strategies to protect workers, and clear instructions should be laid out by organisations to avoid confusion, says MEF. – dpa

AS Malaysians return from their holidays and go back to work in the new year, employers are keeping a close eye on the Omicron variant of concern.

The Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) is advising bosses not to rush to put all employees back in the workplace to prevent outbreaks, especially with the new Covid-19 variant being said to spread rapidly with less obvious symptoms.

“Bringing all workers back on site may increase risk of infection. Wherever feasible, employers are advised to implement hybrid face-to-face and work from home (WFH) arrangements to reduce risks of infection,” says MEF president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman.

He describes the Omicron variant as a major concern for bosses in 2022 as it may derail recovery efforts.

“The best action is to tighten prevention steps to reduce its spread,” he says of the variant, which is also reportedly more resistant to vaccines.

Syed Hussain also cautions bosses to treat any slight symptoms among their workers as a risk and threat.

“Weekly Covid-19 self-testing should be in place for all employees to ensure that only workers who are not infected are allowed to enter the workplace,” he says.

Recently, Health Minister Khairy Jamaluddin announced shorter intervals for Covid-19 booster shots in a bid to stop the spread of new variants.

Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccine booster shots can be given at least three months after the second dose.

Khairy added that following the discovery of a confirmed Omicron variant case in Sarawak in a man who has no history of recent travel abroad, it is very likely that the variant is now in our community.

As such, it is timely that employers are strengthening measures to mitigate the risks of Omicron variant infection.

“WFH is one of the prevention strategies to protect workers, and clear instructions should be laid out by organisations to avoid confusion. As for workplaces that are unable to practice WFH, bosses should rearrange the workplace with physical distancing in mind,” Syed Hussain says.

Syed Hussain also reminds employers to ensure proper indoor air quality and flow by following the Guidance Note on Ventilation and Indoor Air Quality from Occupational Safety and Health Department guidelines, which can be accessed at bit.ly/ventilation_guide.

“We also urge workers to keep practising SOPs strictly, such as physical distancing, always wear a mask in public, wash hands with soap or sanitising hands after touching surfaces such as door knobs or elevators buttons,” he says.

For small and medium enterprises (SMEs), it can be a challenge to implement WFH arrangements, given their limited workforce and resources. SMEs have allowed most of their employees back into the workplace since the reopening of sectors, says SME Association of Malaysia national president Ding Hong Sing.

“We will continue to assess the current situation and plan accordingly.

“It will be tough to go back to full WFH arrangements because we need the staff on site. And some SMEs have just five or six full-time employees,” he says.

Nevertheless, Ding says some companies allow certain staff members, like marketing or IT personnel to WFH to reduce the possible spread of the virus.

“There are SMEs who also ask staff to come into work a few days in a week as opposed to every working day,” he adds.

On another matter, Ding says SME businesses, including factories, are hoping for government assistance following the recent floods, which affected several states in Malaysia.

“After being submerged by flood waters, the machinery in these factories are spoiled and this has disrupted operations.

“We hope the government will be able to provide some form of relief for suffering SMEs,” he says.

Syed Hussain hopes all private sector employers will continue assisting workers who have been affected by the recent floods too.

“Many employees are not able to come back to work yet.

“They may need some time to manage their situation before they are able to resume their duties,” he says, adding that some employers have extended calamity leave for such workers.

He says it is MEF’s wish that all will be able to recover quickly from the impact of the floods and continue efforts to put our economic recovery back on track.

While some employers have set up their own teams to help their staff, others also provided affected workers with medical assistance including to treat mental stress from the disaster.

“MEF members and private sector employers should also support the works of the government agencies and NGOs if they have the funds and other resources to alleviate the suffering of the flood victims,” Syed Hussain says.