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COMMENTARY

COVID-19: Issues & Challenges During the Pandemic

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Sarawak Pharmacy Enforcement

The Year 2020 where the long-term socioeconomic goals for the country famously known as Wawasan 2020 or Vision 2020 launched by the former two-times Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad supposedly to take place. Instead, major, unprecedented series of unfortunate events have befallen the country, or rather the world. The novel coronavirus referred to as the Wuhan virus, the namesake of the allegedly the place of origin for the virus. WHO notified as a 'viral pneumonia' and 'pneumonia of unknown cause' in Wuhan, China on the 31st December 2019 and by 11th March 2020, the novel coronavirus has been recognised as a global health threat and declared as a pandemic by the Director-General of WHO.

The Ministry of Health is one of the leading players during this critical time. The frontliners consisted of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians, and many others have been working day and night tirelessly from the start of the Movement Control Order (MCO) to flatten the curve. The Department of Pharmaceutical Services, among other things, has been tasked with procuring the highly sought-after personal protection equipment for the use of all frontliners. This outbreak has altered the way of things usually done and one might wonder, how does this pandemic affect the Sarawak Pharmacy Enforcement Department (SPED)? In general, the Pharmacy Enforcement Department in Malaysia is the authority entrusted to enforce the relevant acts and regulations stipulated to preserve the health of the public as a whole. The duty of an enforcement officer is fieldwork in nature; thus, when the MCO enforced, all of these tasks have come to a halt which includes the inspection on the registered, licensed as well as unlicensed premises and most importantly, the monitoring of all entry points including the land, sea, and air. The importation of unregistered health products could no longer be screened

physically by field officers, and these could pose health risks to the consignees or potential buyers of such products.

At the height of the pandemic, we observed a steep increase in the online purchasing of products that involved claims to treat or prevent Covid-19 such as antimalarial agents, hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine phosphate, antiretroviral medication, lopinavir/ritonavir, and so forth. These medications contained poisons which are listed in the First Schedule of the Poisons Act 1952 and the selling of these poisons by an unauthorized person is an offence under the same act. The number also sees to increased demand for traditional preparations, especially unregistered Chinese herbal supplements used for respiratory ailments (i.e. Lianhua Qingwen Jiaonang) of advertisements for such products on e-commerce platforms. According to the SPED database, there are almost a hundred ads on such products being screened on three different e-commerce platforms in just two months (April and May). This data includes the sale of non-notified hand sanitiser.

Similar to any pharmaceutical product, cosmetic is also controlled by the authoritative body, National Pharmaceutical Regulatory Agency (NPRO) via a notification (NOT) to ensure its safety, quality and effectiveness. Hand sanitiser classified as a cosmetic under regulation 2 of Control of Drug And Cosmetics Regulations 1984; *“cosmetic means any substance or preparation intended to be placed in contact with the various external parts of the human body (including epidermis, hair system, nails, lips, and external genital organs) or with the teeth and the mucous membranes of the oral cavity with a view exclusively or mainly to cleaning them, perfuming them, changing their appearance or correcting body odours, protecting them or keeping them in good condition.”* Unsurprisingly, the demand for hand sanitisers has skyrocketed, and the local distributors have to resort to seeking supplies from overseas and some without NOT. Thus, SPED officers have to diligently screen the consignments and withhold them until the notification obtained. By coping with the scarcity, the public learnt how to produce hand sanitiser at home for self-use and some even made for sale. However, to use homemade hand sanitiser is not recommended due to the level of its effectiveness and hygiene concerns. Another alarming issue is the unlawful reselling of government-only items i.e. Septi-Sol Solution Hand Sanitizer and SURGIPRO® surgical disposable face mask by unscrupulous opportunists. Unfortunately, our hands are tied when dealing with such cases due to the lacuna in the existing legislation. The hand-sanitiser mentioned above is a notified cosmetic and the face mask not controlled under the pharmacy acts; thus, prosecution under

the laws is out of the question. At most, we can only investigate the alleged misconduct and report to the Pharmacy Board for further action if the seller is a registered pharmacist. Otherwise, a verified complaint will be forwarded to the dedicated forensic pharmacy team to take down the account if transaction performed online.

Despite the challenges and obstacles that arose amid the calamity, all healthcare counterparts, including SPED, will continue to do our best to serve the people and the country. Changes were made to the existing standard of procedures and the guidelines to minimise exposure and to protect the personnel and the clients alike, as well as to shift our focus on the more critical tasks among the usual duties to adapt with the current circumstances. Indeed, we are in for a long fight until the vaccine is available. In the meantime, we have to keep playing our roles, remain to be vigilant and God's willing, this too shall pass.