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New studies by local researchers explore social impact of Covid-19 outbreak in Singapore

By TESSA OH



TODAY file photo

The studies look at the public's perception of the Covid-19 outbreak, the role of mainstream media and social media during the pandemic, and the experiences of Covid-19 patients before and after recovering from the disease.

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SINGAPORE — Four new studies by local researchers are under way to understand how social behaviour here has been influenced by the Covid-19 outbreak, which has infected more than 29,000 people and claimed 23 lives in Singapore.

The studies, which are jointly conducted by the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), also seek to understand the role that these social factors play in managing the outbreak.

They look at the public's perception of the Covid-19 outbreak, the role of mainstream media and social media during the pandemic, and the experiences of Covid-19 patients before and after recovering from the disease.

The preliminary findings of the studies were released on Thursday (May 21) at a press conference held to give more information on the three studies.

Here is a closer look at the four studies:

1. Public perceptions of Covid-19

This study is aimed at assessing the public's knowledge of Covid-19 and how this influenced their behaviour and their perception of the risks during the outbreak.

It has surveyed 700 participants, aged 16 and above, who answered a series of questions as part of an online questionnaire that was issued every two weeks.

The participants have taken eight surveys since the study was launched in January.

Among other things, the preliminary findings showed that more than 80 per cent of the respondents placed a high level of trust in official information sources, such as those from the Government or reputable news agencies.

Those who trusted official sources were also more likely to adopt the recommended disease prevention practices, such as frequent hand washing and wearing a mask.

On the subject of fake news, more than half of those surveyed said they have received misinformation about Covid-19.

Of these, about 14 per cent said they would recirculate the information, while about a third of respondents said they would consider whether the information can be trusted before they pass it on.

The study also found that most of those who recirculated information about Covid-19 on social media were more likely to participate in the episodes of panic buying that took place in the early stages of the outbreak.

Following this, NCID said in a press statement on Thursday that it aims to recruit more respondents for the study and expand the cohort size to about 2,000 individuals.

Professor Leo Yee Sin, NCID's executive director, said it also hopes to recruit more seniors — those above 60 — for the study as this group is presently underrepresented in the findings, making up about 16 per cent of the respondents.

This is so that the researchers can gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by this segment of the population.

2. Influence of mainstream and social media

A study conducted by NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information found that much of the information shared on social media platforms about Covid-19 was inaccurate or false.

This can include:

- Unintentional misinformation. For example, messages shared in private chat groups among friends and family that were then recirculated and taken out of context
- Misleading content, such as the claims circulating last month that the police were conducting checks at residential units to enforce safe distancing measures
- Fabricated content, which refers to doctored or manipulated posts on social media, such as the fake screengrab of a tweet from regional news outlet CNA announcing school closures in February

Responding to questions from the media, Professor May O Lwin, who led the NTU study, said one of the reasons fake news has become so prevalent despite the public's high trust in official sources is that the increased use of messaging apps has made it more likely for information to be miscommunicated.

In the past, said Prof Lwin, internet users were more likely to think twice before sending out information on bigger social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, owing to the fact that it can easily be traced to the source.

Yet, on messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, users may be more inclined to share information as there is a greater feeling of privacy in private chat groups.

This makes it easier for information to be miscommunicated when it becomes reproduced on more public social media platforms, said Prof Lwin.

Moving forward, Prof Lwin said the research team hopes to carry out more research to draw links between how the sentiments on the virus shared on social media have had an impact on people's responses to the outbreak.

3. Experiences of Covid-19 patients

NCID, together with NUS' Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, conducted interviews with about 40 Covid-19 patients to understand their experiences before, during and after they were discharged from hospital.

During the interviews, patients were asked about a variety of topics, including when they realised they had symptoms, how they coped with isolation, and what life was like for them after they received their diagnosis.

The survey found that many of the respondents had mild symptoms, especially at the beginning of the illness, and many did not realise they were ill.

Most of the respondents also thought their risk of contracting Covid-19 was low, even if they had been told that they were in contact with someone who had tested positive for the coronavirus.

Most of them had contracted the virus either in their household or in the workplace.

The study also found that patients with mild symptoms had difficulty coping with being isolated in hospital.

This was because they found it more difficult to understand why they remained in the hospital, sometimes for nine weeks, despite feeling well, said Dr Ho Lai Peng, the principal medical social worker at NCID and one of the researchers involved in the study.

4. Effects of Covid-19 mitigation measures on social cohesion

The three institutions will be collaborating on a fourth study, which aims to examine the community's perception of the efforts made to mitigate community transmission of the virus.

Among other things, the research team will be studying the experiences of migrant workers and how they coped under the social restrictions that were put in place to curb the spread of Covid-19.

This is in light of the fact that the migrant worker population has been significantly affected by the virus, said the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.

The research team will conduct a series of online surveys and in-depth online interviews, and use an electronic mailbox system — called "The Mailbox Project" — which aims to collect letters from migrant workers.

These workers will be able to pen their thoughts on how they have been affected by Covid-19 and how they are coping with the outbreak.

These letters will be kept confidential and identities will not be revealed, said Dr Zoe Hildon, one of the researchers involved in the project.

Preliminary results of the study will be released in August, the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health said.