

## Coronavirus Singapore

# S'pore inks deal for antiviral pill to treat Covid-19

Drug developed by Merck said to be effective against all known variants of the coronavirus

Cheryl Tan

Singapore has inked a supply and purchase agreement for an antiviral pill to treat Covid-19 that is said to be effective against all known variants of the virus, including the Delta variant.

The drug was developed by pharmaceutical firm Merck in the

United States and Canada, together with Miami-based Ridgeback Biotherapeutics. Merck is known as MSD elsewhere in the world.

MSD said yesterday that the drug will be available in Singapore once it has received authorisation and approval for use.

The Straits Times has contacted the Health Ministry for comment. Known as molnupiravir, the drug

comes in pill form and targets an enzyme that the virus needs to make copies of itself, by introducing errors into its genetic code.

This particular enzyme, known as the viral polymerase, is conserved across different variants, making molnupiravir effective across the Gamma, Delta and Mu variants.

Data from clinical trials suggests the drug is most effective when given early in the course of infection, said MSD.

Interim trial results last Friday showed the drug may reduce the chance of hospitalisation or death

by half for patients who are at risk of severe disease.

The companies plan to seek US emergency use authorisation for the pill as soon as possible and submit applications to regulatory agencies worldwide.

So far, Australia has entered advance supply agreements with MSD to purchase 300,000 courses of the drug.

Other places such as South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan and Malaysia are also in talks with the company to purchase the drug.

Dr Shawn Vasoo, clinical director of the National Centre for Infec-

tious Diseases, told The Straits Times that it is not so clear at this point how molnupiravir might compare with other therapies for mild to moderate Covid-19, such as antibody treatment or remdesivir, and how clinicians may decide to choose one drug over the other.

"Certainly, oral medication has greater convenience over intravenous medications, but such data is lacking at this point. This may be a potential area for further study," he added.

Currently, molnupiravir is being evaluated as a Covid-19 treatment and a preventive drug.

The global phase three treatment trial enrolled Covid-19 patients with mild to moderate Covid-19 who had symptoms for up to five days.

All of them had at least one risk factor – such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease and being above 60 years old – associated with poor disease outcomes. The trial results are expected early next month, said MSD.

In anticipation of the results, MSD expects to produce 10 million courses of treatment by the end of the year, with more doses to be produced next year.

The second trial, looking at molnupiravir as a preventive drug, will study the efficacy and safety of administering the drug to prevent the spread of Covid-19 within household settings.

The results are likely to be available in the first half of next year.

Local researchers had in their own study also identified molnupiravir as an effective drug against the original Sars-CoV-2 virus, as well as the Beta and Delta variants.

A team led by Professor Dean Ho, director of the National University of Singapore's Institute for Digital Medicine, together with the DSO National Laboratories, found that molnupiravir, combined with baricitinib, an anti-inflammatory drug, could be a possible combination for Covid-19 treatment.

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## 99.5% of P6 pupils sat PSLE, including some on quarantine orders

Tay Hong Yi

Some 360 to 620 pupils who were on quarantine orders took the PSLE on each of the four main days of examination.

This worked out to 0.9 to 1.6 per cent of the 39,300 pupils sitting the PSLE this year, said the Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board (SEAB) in response to queries from The Straits Times.

The exams ended yesterday. Altogether, 99.5 per cent of pupils in Primary 6 this year sat the PSLE.

To be able to do so, pupils on quarantine orders had to have a negative result for Covid-19 on both a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, which takes 24 hours to process, and an antigen rapid test

(ART). The earliest a candidate could sit a PSLE paper was generally within two days of being served a quarantine order.

In addition to those allowed leave from quarantine, about 500 to 950 pupils who were on leave of absence, approved absence and medical leave for acute respiratory infections took the examination as well.

They made up between 1.3 per cent and 2.4 per cent of the cohort. Meanwhile, about 21,600 students took the GCE N and O-level examinations on Monday and Tuesday.

The overall average attendance rate over the two days was about 98 per cent, said SEAB.

About 60 students present each day were on leave from quarantine orders, and another 170 had been given absences because of acute



Nanyang Primary School pupils, carrying plastic covers for their tables, leaving the school compound after sitting their final paper yesterday. Altogether, 99.5 per cent of pupils in Primary 6 this year sat the PSLE. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

respiratory infections.

"The necessary safe management measures were strictly adhered to in schools, to ensure the

safe conduct of the examinations for all students and staff," added SEAB.

Pupils given leave to take the ex-

aminations were subject to stringent criteria beyond the testing requirements.

They had to arrive at the exam

venue by foot or private transport, and could not stop along the way. Parents could accompany their child only if they, too, had tested negative on both PCR and ART tests.

Schools had to be told if a pupil was taking a particular paper so they could prepare the exam venue. This included having a separate room for quarantined candidates, an increased distance between seats, designated entry and exit points and restrooms, as well as a start time 30 minutes after that for the rest of their cohort.

The Straits Times reported last Wednesday that many parents of pupils taking the PSLE had expressed confusion and frustration about Covid-19 protocols and the impact on their children.

The Ministry of Education said that special consideration would be given to children who missed their PSLE papers because of quarantine.

Such a candidate will be awarded a projected grade for a particular paper that takes into consideration multiple sources of data, such as the child's performance in other papers for that subject and the school cohort's performance in national and school-based exams.

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## TTSH staff trained and deployed to carry out less specialised nursing tasks

Timothy Goh

About 150 staff from Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) have stepped up to be trained in some nursing duties to ease the strain on its nursing workforce.

Around 1,500 employees across the hospital – including doctors, nurses and therapists – have been deployed to fight Covid-19 at TTSH's screening centre and the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID).

Dr Hoi Shu Yin, TTSH's chief nurse, said yesterday: "We have been on the Covid-19 front lines for nearly two years, and while enhanced infection control measures are the norm for our staff, the recent surge in the community has not been easy."

To allow the remaining nurses to concentrate on clinical care for patients, the hospital launched a programme last month for non-nursing staff to be trained and carry out less-specialised – but still essential – nursing tasks.

Known as para-nurses, the staff from various backgrounds are deployed temporarily in one of four roles. First, there are therapy assistants, who help provide close bedside care to patients by doing tasks such as moving them in and out of bed and feeding them.

Second, there are patient service associates, who collect data on patients' vital signs.

Third, there are health attendants, who provide cleaning services and assist with turning bedsores.

Fourth, there are administrators, who help collect blood samples from patients. Staff who were previously trained as nurses but moved on to administrative roles are trained in this duty.

Ms Laura Ho, deputy director of TTSH's nursing service, said that the idea was to assign trainees to jobs which matched skills they had picked up in their previous roles, so that they could be quickly trained and deployed.

"During this pandemic, the



Therapy assistant Crishanna Devi Naidu Thayalamurugan tending to a patient. To make the switch to her new role as a para-nurse, Ms Crishanna was taught the different types of oxygen masks patients might require and how to change their diapers, among other things. PHOTO: TAN TOCK SENG HOSPITAL

nurses are very drained," she said. "It's about providing that extra helping hand – and to tell our nurses, 'You're not alone, you have a group of people around to help you manage.'"

She added that the hospital aims to have another 30 such para-nurses trained by the end of this month.

The para-nurses are deployed from areas which have reduced their patient loads by postponing non-urgent outpatient appointments or electives.

Two of those extending help are Ms Crishanna Devi Naidu Thayalamurugan, a therapy assistant in

TTSH's occupational therapy department, and Ms Kelly Ler, a senior patient service associate in the hospital's Centre for Geriatric Medicine.

In her previous role, Ms Crishanna helped therapists transfer and move patients, and would sometimes see her own patients as well.

Ms Ler used to assist doctors during consultations, and called patients and families to arrange appointments and home deliveries for medication.

To make the switch to her new role, Ms Crishanna was taught the different types of oxygen masks patients might require and how to

change their diapers, among other things. Ms Ler had to learn how to feed patients and move them from a bed to a chair.

They currently look after about five to 10 patients in general wards each. Aside from performing duties such as measuring vital signs and taking patients to the toilet, they also lend them a listening ear.

"They don't really have a lot of people to talk to, so when we're there and can listen to them, it makes them happier, puts them at ease," said Ms Crishanna.

Ms Ler said she does fear getting Covid-19, given the recent surge in cases, as she lives with her elderly

parents. But despite the risk and other challenges, they are pressing on.

"This is part of our job," Ms Ler explained. "I know the nurses are already very stressed, so if we can help with these duties, it'll help reduce some of their workload."

Ms Crishanna added: "Our patients are (our) No. 1 priority. We want the best care for them, and if there's a manpower shortage, it'll be difficult to give them our best..."

"Now that we're here, we can attend to their needs and the nurses can do their job even better."

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