

## From The Editor

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# The Health of Thai People: COVID-19, monkeypox, dengue fever, and marijuana

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In spite of having been predicted that there would be a spike in cases and death rates within 1-2 weeks after the Songkran (water splashing) Festival which took place during 13-15 April, the country's Covid-19 situation, instead, has improved and the number of new cases, severe cases and fatalities has declined considerably and continuously to lower than 10,000 a day since 2 May 2022, compared to the around 20,000 infections daily in the previous weeks. Covid cases were also dropping across ASEAN countries during that period. On 11 May 2022, the first group of fully vaccinated workers from Myanmar were allowed to legally

work in Thailand without quarantine. Laos and Thailand agreed to reopen their border check points on 18 May 2022. These good signs initiated the reopening of the nightlife industry which is an important part of tourism in Thailand on 1 June 2022 in 17 provinces and special areas, especially at the tourist islands which can be more easily monitored, referred to as “endemic sandbox” in 14 provinces. The fatalities remained lower than 20 a day and there was no death from COVID-19 reported in Bangkok and southern provinces after 2 weeks of the reopening. It is on 23 June 2022 that the Thai government dropped a mask mandate in all public areas and lift nation-wide COVID-19 restrictions, regardless to the discovery of the COVID-19 Omicron's sub variants BA.4 and BA.5 in more than 180 cases

in Bangkok. Wearing a mask is, however, recommended as a voluntary practice in crowded places including on flights. Free treatments at private hospitals, home isolation and community isolation programs for COVID-19 patients ended on 1 July 2022. COVID-19 patients with symptoms receive free treatments at registered hospitals based on their medical benefits and coverage. However, the Thai government maintains the State of Emergency, from 1 August to 30 September 2022, for the need to control the rapid spread of Omicron sub-variants, which was likely less severe but more rapidly spread, especially among children. During the second week of August, the rate of infections was 31, 148 cases a day with 238 deaths, most of whom were people over 60, those with underlying diseases and pregnant women. In the hospital I was working for, during the time of writing this article, around one third of doctors I met had been infected with COVID-19 through their children whose conditions appeared to be much more severe than parents'. Lately, COVID-19 vaccination was advised in children between 3 months to 11 years old to prevent the Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) which accounted for more than 100 cases or around 27% of cases in Thailand. The Public Health Ministry accelerated the process of Covid-19 drug registration for general use while the Government Pharmaceutical Organization (GPO) prepared the drugs such as Favipiravir, Molnupiravir and Remdesivir for distribution to the general public for patients doing home isolation, starting on 1 September 2022.

Thailand's first official case of monkey pox in a 27-year-old tourist from Nigeria in Phuket was reported on 21 July 2022 after monkey pox was reported in a transit passenger to Australia a few months before. He visited a hospital because of his skin blisters on 16 July 2022 and the lab tests were confirmed 2 days later when he was subsequently discovered to have departed for Cambodia and was found in Phnom Penh, the capital, on 24 July 2022. On 24 August 2022, the sixth case was reported. Among these 6 cases, 2 were believed to get infected in Thailand. At the time of writing this article, there were around 46,047 cases of monkey pox around the world, more than 70% of which were in America and Europe [1].

Dengue fever, viral infection transmitted to humans through the bite of infected mosquitoes called *Aedes aegypti*, is an endemic disease throughout the Southeast Asian countries. To draw public concern, every 15th of June is set as ASEAN Dengue Day. Dengue fever outbreaks usually occur about once every two years, increasing cases in this year in Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines are likely alarming after the decrease in 2020 and 2021. Dengue fever and Covid-19 may share some similar early symptoms such as fever, nausea, vomiting, rashes, and pain. In addition, one patient can have both Covid-19 and dengue fever at the same time, and both diseases can be found in all age groups. The cause of death in patients infected with Dengue virus is internal bleeding. From the beginning of 2022 to 11 July, Thailand reported 9,473 total dengue cases, 7,390 of which were those with dengue fever, 2006 were those with dengue hemorrhagic fever and 77 were those experiencing the dengue shock syndrome including eight deaths. Most deaths from the Dengue infection were likely from Indonesia, the most populated ASEAN country, which comprised of about 228 deaths from January to 5 May 2022 when Thailand reported 3 deaths during that period. Singapore seems to be successful in reducing Dengue fever by cutting mosquito populations by releasing male mosquitoes infected with the *Wolbachia* bacteria to mate resulting eggs that cannot produce offspring [2]. Dengue fever vaccines are available in some countries with a high dengue fever burden, and is recommended for individuals with a history of dengue infection.

Tourists coming to South East Asia has long been warned of the harsh penalties they face if caught with drug trafficking, even small amounts of marijuana. On 9 June 2022, Thailand has become the first in Asia and the most liberal country to marijuana when she legalised cultivating and consuming cannabis, with the hope that it will bring new sources of income to the farmers, tourist and health care businesses. However, within one week, significant number of consumers reported dizziness and nausea after consuming food and drinks thought to contain cannabis [2]. With the concern of inappropriate use of marijuana in the young, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation announced a ban on the sale of food and beverages containing cannabis, as well as the recreational use of cannabis in the universities. On 13 July 2022, after multiple reports of illness

and even hospitalization of people after consuming cannabis, the Medical Council of Thailand released 7 guidelines on cannabis and hemp use, stating that only extracts with a known amount of active ingredients could be used in medical purposes only if other medicines are not effective in curing or controlling symptoms of certain diseases. Uses on pregnant and breastfeeding women and those who are under 25 years old, or into food or sweets for the public, or for recreational purposes are not recommended. More than 851 Thai doctors put their names to a letter describing that recreational use of marijuana was a danger to public health in both short and long terms, and called for an immediate end to the liberalization of marijuana.

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