

- Virus

Threat posed by airborne Covid at workplaces must be taken seriously — Experts

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KUALA LUMPUR: Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March last year, clusters linked to the workplace have been the chief contributors to the hike in cases in Malaysia.

In fact, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has reported that to date, workplace clusters comprised 53.2 per cent or 1,549 of the total number of clusters recorded nationwide.

Local researchers have identified workplaces, especially in enclosed buildings, as having a high risk of being a hive of viral infections, including Covid-19.

This is because studies have shown that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the deadly Covid-19, can spread through the air.

Even the World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned about the high risk of Covid-19 transmissions in indoor spaces with poor ventilation systems.

Studies by local researchers have revealed that the Covid-19 virus can remain suspended in the air for up to eight hours in indoor spaces without proper ventilation and can spread as far as six metres in aerosol particles.

One of the studies, conducted over April and May last year by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) academics and led by Department of Earth Science and Environment senior lecturer Associate Prof Dr Mohd Shahrul Mohd Nadzir, found that enclosed spaces with air-conditioning operations that recycle the same air can facilitate the transmission of the virus in the air via aerosols.

Another study, carried out between August and October 2020 by Universiti Tuanku Abdul Rahman (Utar) indoor air simulation expert Associate Prof Dr Bernard Saw Lip Huat and Universiti Malaya toxicologist Associate Prof Dr Leo Bey Fen, found that the Covid-19 virus particles can remain in the air for over eight hours which makes it difficult to control transmissions.

“This is why it is very important to have good ventilation – windows at home and in the office should be left open to allow fresh air to flow in.

“However, in the case of offices and factories situated in enclosed spaces where the windows cannot be opened, the proper maintenance of their airconditioning and ventilation system is crucial,” Mohd Shahrul told Bernama.

He said the probability of triggering a Covid-19 cluster is high in a workplace bereft of good ventilation and a well-maintained air-conditioning system if one of the employees happen to be Covid-19 positive as he/she can spread the virus to others through the air.

The findings of the local researchers concerned, which were published in the international scientific journal Nature Scientific Reports in January this year, need to be viewed seriously due to existing statistics pointing to workplaces as prime Covid-19 hotspots.