

ARMING the Vulnerable



Dr. Farina Mohd Salleh

IJN's two greatest treasures are its staff and its patients. So, once we had vaccinated our frontliners and supporting staff, as per MKN and MOH directives, it was time to take care of our patients. This was all the more crucial as, by virtue of being a hospital dedicated to cardiovascular ailments, IJN's patients are in the high-risk category.

Leading our Phase 2 and 3 Vaccination programme was Emergency Physician, **Dr Farina Mohd Salleh**.

Already designated as a general Pusat Pemberian Vaksin Hospital Swasta (PPVHS) under the National Immunisation Programme (NIP), IJN received approval to commence vaccination for the public on 28 April 2021. Phase 2 of our vaccination programme started on 4 June, and the priority was senior citizens aged 60 and above, those above 18 who were in the high-risk category because of chronic illnesses and the disabled or Orang Kurang Upaya (OKU).

However, we did not stop there. We knew that our own our patients were our priority and needed to be vaccinated at a center that was familiar with their cardiac illnesses. This would include patients who have poor heart function, stents or other cardiac implants, cardiac transplants, or are on specialised medication among others, as well people who have special needs or a history of severe allergies. This is because post-vaccination management may be required and a special PPV would be better equipped to handle this than a general PPV.

To deal with these special cases and with the support of our CEO, Datuk Dr. Aizai Azan Abdul Rahim, IJN liaised with JKWPKL and was appointed as a Special PPV (SPPV) - a status usually only accorded to government hospitals. This part of Phase 2 kicked off on 5 July where we not only were able to vaccinate our own patients but would also be assisting to vaccinate non-IJN patients with specific health conditions and allergies.

We really did not face many problems vaccinating our patients as the set-up and processes had all been put in place to vaccinate our frontliners in the months before. We just followed the tried and tested procedures and protocols.

However, we did do a lot of groundwork in preparing the patients beforehand. Even before becoming a PPV, knowing that vaccines were imminent, we started pre-vaccination assessments of our patients and educating them.

We did this in our wards and outpatient clinics, as well as through e-mails, phone calls and social media. We opened communication channels for existing and former patients to register with us and set up counters at the lobby. We especially wanted to reach out to our special cases, the vulnerable patients, whom we felt would be more confident of vaccination within the IJN setting with our doctors on hand.

As for our out-of-state patients, I must commend our IT department, which did a marvelous job in sifting through patient records to determine eligibility and generate a list for us to work with while we connected with these patients via our Customer Service Department.



Many of our patients, even the outstation ones, came back to IJN for vaccination, and those who could not, went to PPVs close to them after a pre-vaccine assessment form was provided to them. Subsequently, we managed to cover most of IJN's patients within 8 weeks.

Meanwhile, Protect Health, the agency selected by the government to manage private hospital vaccinations, continued to feed us names of non-IJN patients who fell under Phase 2 & 3. Actually, by the time the country entered Phase 2 of the NIP, many were clamouring for the COVID vaccination, and we had no shortage of positive respondents.

And so they came, eagerly and sometimes anxiously, in a steady stream. Whenever necessary, we referred cases to allergy specialists in Hospital Kuala Lumpur for further assessment before embarking on vaccination for those with history of severe allergies.

Vaccinating an average of 250 per day, we managed to get through this group relatively quickly. With other PPVs and private hospitals nationwide also focusing on this sector of the population, Phase 2 and 3 progressed rapidly and soon we started to see younger and younger people without comorbidities coming through the vaccination schedule, signaling the end of these phases by the end of August.

In total, we vaccinated some 8,136 people in these two months of July and August.

Looking back now on those months, I am glad that we met our goals of prioritising and vaccinating our patients. We started to make plans for this right at the get-go, even before MOH made announcements. We put everything in place and kept our fingers crossed that we would receive the go-ahead.

It took a lot of work, and although there were some challenges, we persevered and pushed on. Vaccinating our patients as early as possible was very important to us, and because we pushed for this, we were ultimately able to contribute towards the NIP as a special PPV.

The whole hospital banded together, with many working from home, wearing various hats and creating something out of thin air, meeting this urgent need with amazing talent, capabilities and speed. At times, we also received last-minute instructions and just had to go with the flow and respond accordingly.

I must express my heartfelt gratitude to our leadership in IJN, namely our CEO Datuk Dr. Aizai Azan, Deputy CEO Dato' Akmal Arief and CCO Dr. Hasri who often visited the PPV to check in on us and give us guidance, team members from various departments who were able to work well together to make this happen and especially our Senior Principle Pharmacist, Miss Kamaleswary Arumugam, who was on site each day to head the daily operations. I would also like to make a special mention of our IT department that worked very hard and to incorporate automation in the entire vaccination process, the hospital's overall tracking and management of COVID and related SOP requirements and challenges.

Most of all, I am glad of the success of Phase 2 and Phase 3, as the vaccinees were people who would have faced higher risks if they had contracted COVID-19.

The efforts were truly worth it, and I am humbled to have been a part of it.