

CHP of DH strives to contribute to global fight against COVID-19

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) has been participating in the global fight against COVID-19 and strives to make a contribution by sharing with the international community Hong Kong's efforts in combating the pandemic, especially in response to the emergence of variant strains and timely reporting of findings on variants.

The CHP has conducted a review on the epidemiology of confirmed COVID-19 variant cases reported in Hong Kong from December 2020 to June 2021 and public health control measures relating to COVID-19 variants. The findings have been released as a pre-print pending formal publication in IJID Regions, an official journal of the International Society for Infectious Diseases (doi.org/10.1016/j.ijregi.2021.11.002).

Among the 5 609 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported between December 1, 2020, and June 30, 2021, a total of 393 cases were found to be variant cases (7.0 per cent), including 291 cases of Variants of Concern (74 per cent), 73 cases of Variants of Interest (18.6 per cent) and 29 cases of Alerts for Further Monitoring (7.4 per cent).

The above epidemiological review has found that, unlike some places which saw surges of COVID-19 variants following their introduction, no widespread community outbreak of variant cases was observed in Hong Kong and sustained local transmission of COVID variants was absent. Among the 393 variant cases reported in the period under review, the vast majority of them were imported cases. Only three clusters involving local transmission of COVID-19 variants were identified, with two clusters linked to imported cases (first cases 11643 and 11902 respectively) while the source of the remaining cluster was unknown (first case 11852). Nearly half of the cases in these three clusters were identified during quarantine in quarantine centre. Further community spread was successfully contained.

This success was found to be attributed to the strengthening of public health control measures against variants at various stages, including risk-stratified quarantine and testing requirements for inbound travellers, banning of flights from extremely high-risk areas, enhanced contact tracing and quarantine to 21 days, extensive community testing and enhanced laboratory surveillance. Hong Kong's control strategy has successfully limited the spread of COVID-19 variants from imported cases and prevented the occurrence of community-wide outbreaks, a spokesman for the CHP said.

Of note, the use of whole genome sequencing by the CHP's Public Health Laboratory Services Branch (PHLSB) was pivotal in identifying the sources of the clusters with local transmission. PHLSB as a reference laboratory for COVID-19 designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) was the first institute in the world to upload the whole-genome sequences of the Omicron

variant to the international genomic database GISAID on November 22, contributing to the global surveillance of variant strains.

Amid the global surges of COVID-19 variants and emergence of Omicron variant, the CHP will remain vigilant and constantly review and adjust the control measures and strategies, as well as continue to work closely with local, regional and international partners in terms of experience sharing and expertise support, the spokesman added. The CHP had earlier participated in the annual International Health Regulations Exercise Crystal organised by the WHO's Regional Office for the Western Pacific to enhance communications on and preparedness for the emergence of infectious diseases (for details please refer to www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202112/03/P2021120300501.htm).

Furthermore, to join with the rest of the world to fight against the pandemic, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government announced in October the donation of 7.5 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to the COVAX Facility. The vaccines, to be delivered before the second quarter of 2022 by shipments in batches, will be donated to COVAX Advance Market Commitment Eligible Economies. For details, please refer to www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202110/12/P2021101200714.htm.

The spokesman emphasised that as the Omicron variant is spreading rapidly around the world, it poses increasing threats to the local epidemic situation, while the low COVID-19 vaccination rate for the elderly locally is still cause for concern. At present, the vaccination rate for people aged 80 or above is less than 20 per cent. Despite the fact that the adverse impact of newly emerged variants on the epidemic situation is not fully known yet, both Comirnaty and CoronaVac vaccines are highly effective in preventing severe complications and deaths from COVID-19. The CHP strongly urges the public who are not yet vaccinated, especially senior citizens, chronic patients and other immunocompromised persons who face a much higher chance of death after COVID-19 infection, to get vaccinated as early as possible for better self-protection. For those who have completed the primary series and are eligible for the third dose, they should go for the third dose of vaccination as soon as possible.

Details of the vaccination programme can be found at the designated website (www.covidvaccine.gov.hk).