

CHP provides update on investigations on clusters of COVID-19 imported cases involving Emirates flight

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) today (December 2) said that it has been following up on the three clusters (11 patients) of imported cases involving the same flight EK384 arriving in Hong Kong earlier on November 21. According to the whole genome sequencing analysis conducted by the DH's Public Health Laboratory Services Branch (PHLSB), it is confirmed that some of the cases have identical genetic sequences, suggesting that the three clusters are likely to be epidemiologically linked.

The flight (EK384) was operated by Emirates from Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, via Bangkok, Thailand, and arrived in Hong Kong on November 21. Eight cases belonged to a family which boarded the flight in Pakistan (cases 12411, 12412 and 12413 tested positive during the "test-and-hold" arrangement upon arrival at the Temporary Specimen Collection Centre (TSCC) at Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA); whereas cases 12437, 12438, 12439, 12443 and 12447 tested positive at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre).

Amongst the other three cases, case 12420 boarded the flight in Bangkok and tested positive during quarantine at a designated quarantine hotel after arrival. The remaining two cases involved a couple from India via Dubai (case 12429 tested positive during quarantine at a designated quarantine hotel; whereas case 12434 tested positive at the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre).

According to the genetic sequencing analysis by the PHLSB, these 11 patients were found to be carrying the L452R mutant strain. The whole genome sequencing analysis completed today also confirmed that it belonged to the Delta variant and that cases 12413, 12420, 12429, 12434, 12437 and 12438 have identical genetic sequences, suggesting that these six patients are likely to be epidemiologically linked. The CHP cannot rule out the possibility that the family cluster of eight cases may have spread the virus to other three cases by personal contact and share use of toilets in the aircraft.

There were a total of 74 passengers in the flight including the above 11 cases (two of them in business cabin and the other nine in economy class) and one case unrelated to the clusters (case 12423). As a number of passengers confirmed to have COVID-19 by arrival testing, the DH had earlier invoked the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H) to prohibit the landing of passenger flights from Dubai and Bangkok operated by Emirates in Hong Kong from November 23 to December 6.

Taking into consideration the latest epidemiological information, the CHP considered that the passengers of that flight may be prone to higher

infection risk and will adopt more prudent quarantine and testing arrangements. Amongst the persons arriving in Hong Kong via that flight, four of them were already sent to the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre for quarantine after having been classified as close contacts of the above confirmed cases, and as United Arab Emirates and Thailand are both Group A specified places (high-risk), all persons had to undergo compulsory quarantine at a designated quarantine hotel for 21 days upon arrival in Hong Kong. As of now, 57 passengers are still undergoing quarantine at designated quarantine hotels. They tested negative by three tests already conducted as of yesterday (the eleventh day). The CHP will increase the number of tests for these persons during the rest of their quarantine period. "Parallel Testing" will also be arranged on the nineteenth day so as to further verify their negative test results before they complete the quarantine.

Meanwhile, one of the passengers of that flight was a local based aircrew. As a person exempted from compulsory quarantine, he stayed in a designated quarantine hotel upon arrival in Hong Kong and completed self-isolation on November 27. The CHP has sent him to the Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre for quarantine until December 12. The non-local aircrews of that flight did not enter Hong Kong and had left Hong Kong already. The CHP had informed the Airport Authority Hong Kong and the relevant airline to monitor the health conditions of overseas aircrews and disinfect the plane thoroughly. The CHP will also ensure the concerned designated quarantine hotel's compliance to the infection control requirements at all times.

As the 11 epidemiologically-linked cases were all detected during the "test-and-hold" arrangement upon arrival at the TSCC at HKIA or during quarantine at designated quarantine hotel or Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre, there has not been a spread in the community. The CHP will adopt the most stringent prevention and control measures to prevent the mutant strain from entering the local community.