

CHP provides update on latest progress on cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan

The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (January 9) received notification from the National Health Commission (NHC) on the latest progress of the identification of the pathogen for the reported cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province.

According to information from the NHC, the Mainland's expert group has preliminarily determined that the pathogen of the cluster of viral pneumonia cases occurring in Wuhan is a kind of novel coronavirus. The relevant Mainland laboratory has detected a novel coronavirus and obtained the whole genome sequence of the virus.

The expert group revealed that molecular testing of 15 cases returned positive results for the novel coronavirus, and the virus was also isolated from a sample of a case. Under electron microscopy, the virus showed the typical appearance of coronavirus. The expert group added that the testing for nucleic acid, genome and antibodies from the samples of patients could be completed within a short period, thereby assisting in confirmation of the pathogen. Nonetheless, the virus isolation and pathogenicity studies would take several weeks. Moving forward, further deliberation by experts taking into consideration pathogen research, epidemiological investigation and clinical assessment is needed.

A spokesman for the CHP said that the CHP's Public Health Laboratory Services Branch is conducting molecular testing for a number of coronaviruses. The CHP has already contacted the NHC regarding the novel coronavirus in today's notification, and expressed the wish to obtain relevant information of the virus, including its genetic sequence, so as to provide accurate testing for the novel coronavirus.

On the other hand, the World Health Organization (WHO) earlier pointed out that there is limited information to determine the overall risk of this reported cluster of pneumonia. The WHO emphasised that more comprehensive information is required to understand the current status and epidemiology of the outbreak, and the clinical picture. Further investigations are also required to determine the source, modes of transmission, extent of infection and countermeasures implemented.

The Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases and the Scientific Committee on Infection Control under the CHP today convened a joint meeting, during which members were updated on the latest progress relating to the Wuhan cases. At the meeting, members discussed and provided advice on the corresponding local response to this novel communicable disease in various aspects of disease prevention and control, including surveillance, emergency preparedness, port health measures, risk communication and health promotion.

The Scientific Committees noted that definite evidence of human-to-human transmission had not been identified in the Mainland so far and no healthcare professionals had been found infected. However, members considered that the available epidemiological information is not sufficient at this stage to reach a conclusion.

The Scientific Committees concurred with the assessment of the WHO that the reported link to a wholesale fish and live animal market in Wuhan could indicate an exposure link to animals. Members also arrived at consensus that public education should be strengthened in urging the public not to consume game meat and not to patronise food premises where game meat is served.

Notwithstanding the risk of importation to Hong Kong of serious pneumonia cases related to those in Wuhan due to extensive travel, especially with the approach of the Lunar New Year holidays, the Scientific Committees acknowledged the well-developed public health system and hospital infrastructure on infection control as well as heightened awareness of the public and healthcare professionals. In the event that cases were imported to Hong Kong, the risk of spread in the local community could be reduced. As the Mainland and Hong Kong have now entered the winter flu season, members also advised the public to receive seasonal influenza vaccination before travelling and to always maintain good personal and environmental hygiene when travelling abroad.