

DH appeals to next of kin to claim bodies of their deceased family members early

The Department of Health (DH) today (April 20) said that in view of a larger number of deaths occurring at the Accident and Emergency Departments (A&EDs) of public hospitals within a short period of time from late February to early March, the DH has adopted a special arrangement from March to early April, with support from the Police, under which the identification procedures of some 1 800 bodies were completed and all with "Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body" issued by the Coroner. As of today, about 1 100 bodies are still stored at DH facilities after completion of the relevant procedures. The DH appealed to the next of kin to claim the bodies of their deceased family members to make funeral arrangements as soon as possible.

To handle the sudden surge of deceased bodies during the epidemic and to address public demand to claim back bodies as soon as possible, relevant government departments have proactively co-ordinated to increase the capacity of body storage facilities and the number of body identification that could be conducted daily so as to address public concern and to enable families of deceased persons to handle after-death arrangements promptly.

A spokesman for the DH pointed out that decomposition of a deceased body is an inevitable natural phenomenon. The degree of decomposition of a particular deceased body upon arrival at the public mortuary and the rate of subsequent decomposition depend on various individual factors. Cold chambers at public mortuaries and refrigerated containers at storage facility are designed for short-term storage of dead bodies only. Storing a deceased body there can only slow down decomposition; further decomposition of the deceased body cannot be prevented.

The spokesman emphasised that upon receipt of bodies at public mortuaries and storage facility of the DH, they would be put in an appropriate space with suitable separation. Moreover, all cooling facilities have been operating normally, with the temperature maintained within the range in compliance with international standard (i.e. around 4 degrees Celsius) for storing bodies for a short period of time. However, the bodies of some deceased patients at A&EDs might have developed decomposition changes before transfer to public mortuaries or storage facility. Storing a deceased body at a cold storage facility over a long period will inevitably cause further deterioration of the facial and overall appearance of the deceased. Hence, the DH encouraged the next of kin to claim the bodies of their deceased family members to make funeral arrangements as soon as possible.

The DH's three public mortuaries (Fu Shan Public Mortuary, Kwai Chung Public Mortuary and Victoria Public Mortuary) have 506 fixed storage spaces. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the total number of storage spaces has

increased to about 1 350 at the end of 2021 through the reopening of Kowloon Public Mortuary and the installation of additional mobile refrigerated body storage units there. Moreover, the DH has earlier installed a new body storage facility near Fu Shan Public Mortuary in Sha Tin, creating additional spaces for about 2 700 bodies within a short period of time. Coupled with other measures, the total number of storage spaces has increased to more than 4 600 at the end of March this year. To prepare for a sudden surge of the epidemic situation, the DH has further enhanced the capacity of storage facilities and will support the Hospital Authority when needed by providing storage spaces to them. The DH will continue to monitor the utilisation situation and storage capacity of public mortuaries. Contingency plans will be established to increase storage capacity swiftly whenever necessary. In the long run, in view of the increasing demand caused by the ageing of the population, the Government has all along strived to increase the permanent body storage capacity. Apart from the additional some 800 storage spaces in the new Fu Shan Public Mortuary, which is about to complete, the Government is also planning to build a new public mortuary building for reprovisioning of the existing Victoria Public Mortuary to enhance the provision of mortuary services.