

DH clarifies arrangement for handling deceased bodies in public mortuaries

In response to media report on the handling of deceased bodies in public mortuaries under the Department of Health (DH), the DH today (March 19) issued the following clarification:

Currently, most of the bodies of deceased patients of public hospitals are stored at the hospitals' mortuaries, and the next-of-kin could identify and claim the bodies for after-death arrangements, while bodies of patients who passed away at Accident and Emergency Departments (A&EDs) have to be transferred to public mortuaries for the DH to handle. In view of the severe local COVID-19 epidemic situation with a larger number of deaths within a short period of time, the HKSAR Government understands that the wish of the next-of-kin of the deceased to claim the body as soon as possible. As such, all relevant government departments have proactively followed up and coordinated so as to address the next-of-kin's concerns in a swift manner.

The DH's spokesman emphasized that public mortuaries under the DH have all along operated and received bodies round the clock throughout the day with responsible personnel working 24 hours on shift. To handle the sudden increase on bodies during the epidemic, the DH's Forensic Pathology Service have arranged additional timeslots on Saturdays for body identification in Kwai Chung Public Mortuary and Kowloon Public Mortuary. In order to address public wish to claim the body as soon as possible, the DH has decided that this special arrangement will be extended to Victoria Public Mortuary and Fu Shan Public Mortuary shortly whereas Kowloon Public Mortuary will also provide service on Sunday mornings.

Since early March, the DH has been deploying internal resources with more civil servants and recruiting contract staff (retired/full-time/part-time) involving doctors and personnel of other grades to speed up the process of body identification/claiming and autopsy. Through deploying internal manpower, the department has also strengthened the handling of public enquiries of public mortuaries.

The spokesman said that all cases handled in public mortuaries are reportable to the Coroner. Upon issuance of the "Certificate of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body" by the Coroner, the next-of-kin can make funeral and body claiming arrangement. Since early March, the death investigation procedure of cases might take longer than usual due to the increased number of bodies of patients who passed away at A&EDs and stored at the newly-installed storage facility. The DH's Forensic Pathology Service has increased manpower, and has deliberated with the Police and the Coroner's Court to devise measures to facilitate the next-of-kin to identify body and handle after-death arrangements in a timely manner. Apart from cases that required autopsy, the next-of-kin will be able to collect the Cremation Order within two working days following body identification, and can claim the body

any day after obtaining the Cremation Order.

The DH has adopted various measures in collaboration with other government departments to increase body storage capacity and speed up the procedure for identification of body, which include installing a new storage facility at government sites near Fu Shan Public Mortuary in Sha Tin with expanded body storage capacity. A special arrangement was also implemented to transfer deceased bodies from the A&EDs of public hospitals to store at the new storage facility.

Moreover, in order to speed up the handling of cases passed away at the A&EDs and transferred to the storage facility, the Police will assist the DH in contacting the next-of-kin for the relevant body identification matters. The Police has started calling the next-of-kin for arranging the necessary procedures in a prompt manner, and has provided telephone numbers for enquiries by the next-of-kin. Starting from next Monday (March 21), the next-of-kin may identify body at the storage facility as arranged by the Police.

The DH will continue to monitor the utilisation situation and storage capacity of public mortuaries and speed up the handling of deceased bodies there by enhanced manpower, as well as to discuss with relevant government departments to formulate appropriate response measures.