

DH speeds up handling of deceased bodies

In view of the severe local COVID-19 epidemic situation, the Department of Health (DH) today (March 17) said that it has adopted various measures in collaboration with other government departments to increase body storage capacity and speed up the procedure for identification of body, so as to handle the increasing number of deceased bodies in public mortuaries under the DH.

With the assistance of several works departments, a storage facility was newly installed at government sites near Fu Shan Public Mortuary in Sha Tin with about 50 refrigerated containers, the body storage capacity has expanded with about 2 300 deceased bodies within a short period of time since March 1. Starting from March 5, the DH implemented a special arrangement with the Police and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department to transfer deceased bodies from the Accident and Emergency Departments (A&EDs) of public hospitals to the new storage facility , and as of today, over 1 500 deceased bodies are stored there. Moreover, in order to speed up the handling of cases passed away at the A&EDs of public hospitals 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.

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 A&EDs have to be transferred to public mortuaries for DH to handle. 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 will continue to monitor the utilisation situation and storage capacity of public mortuaries, and discuss with relevant government departments to formulate appropriate response measures.