

Exercise "Onyx" tests government response against poliomyelitis (with photos)

The Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health (DH) today (November 15) held the ground movement exercise of an exercise code-named "Onyx" at Wang Tau Hom Maternal and Child Health Centre (MCHC) in Wong Tai Sin to assess the operability of the DH's contingency plan for poliomyelitis and the interoperability of relevant government departments and organisations against poliomyelitis.

About 30 participants from relevant government departments took part in the exercise, which consisted of two parts. The first part was a table-top exercise conducted on November 1, in which relevant DH units and other government departments discussed and co-ordinated the communicable disease response measures required in a simulated scenario following the detection of a confirmed poliomyelitis case in Hong Kong.

The second part, conducted today, was a ground movement exercise. Under the exercise simulation, an imported poliomyelitis case involving a Pakistani boy, who had just arrived in Hong Kong and had visited Wang Tau Hom MCHC after disease onset, was reported. The DH conducted immediate epidemiological investigations and contact tracing to identify contacts of the index case, and conducted disinfection of the MCHC. A health talk on infection control measures against poliomyelitis was arranged for contacts of the index case and vaccinations were provided for those indicated.

"Poliomyelitis is caused by poliovirus and mainly affects young children. Most patients will recover, but in severe cases it can lead to permanent disability and death. Vaccination against the disease was introduced in Hong Kong in 1963, with the coverage rate of the vaccination among local children at more than 95 per cent for a long time. Hong Kong has been certified as polio-free by the World Health Organization since 2000," a spokesman for the DH said.

"Nevertheless, since the disease still occurs in some countries, including Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan, and given the busy population movement in Hong Kong and beyond, there is a risk of introduction of poliomyelitis to Hong Kong. Members of the public are reminded that vaccination is the most effective way of preventing the disease."

The DH conducts public health exercises regularly to test and review the effectiveness of the Government's preparedness and response plans, as well as procedures to combat communicable diseases. The exercises can help identify areas for improvement and enhancement, as well as heighten the alertness of relevant stakeholders towards public health crises.

"The exercise provided a valuable opportunity for relevant government departments to test and evaluate the response measures. We will continue to conduct interdepartmental exercises with government departments, organisations and stakeholders concerned in close partnership, with a view to enhancing Hong Kong's overall preparedness in the control and prevention of communicable diseases," the spokesman added.

