

FHB and DH follow up on virus test results

In view of the abnormality observed in the preliminary positive results of COVID-19 testing conducted by a testing service provider, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) and the Department of Health (DH) have initiated an investigation and invited a member of the Government's Expert Advisory Panel, Professor Yuen Kwok-yung and a team from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) to inspect the testing work of the concerned laboratory. Investigation has commenced and will be duly followed up. The concerned private laboratory is BGI.

The incidents involves 30 cases that were initially confirmed by the private laboratory as 29 preliminary positive and 1 "indeterminate" cases. The test results from these specimens collected on April 20 showed that the viral load of the specimens was low (Ct values were mostly higher than 30). The specimens were sent to the Public Health Laboratory Service Branch (PHLSB) of the DH for confirmation test in accordance with established practice. Among these 30 preliminary positive cases, 21 of them were local cases from multiple districts in Hong Kong with no clustered pattern or epidemiological linkage. Some of the patients admitted to the Hospital Authority for isolation were subsequently tested negative for virus and serology testing, there is a possibility that these persons have not contracted the virus at all.

In addition, the same service provider is also involved in two confirmed cases announced earlier by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) in which the persons returned from the Mainland in early April and a preliminary positive case announced on April 17 that involved a kindergarten teacher who was tested with "indeterminate" result by the PHLSB upon the confirmation test (Ct value at 31). These persons were tested again with negative results after admission to hospitals. They were also tested negative for antibody test.

The CHP found the situation abnormal and has invited the Chair Professor of the Department of Microbiology of the HKU, Professor Yuen Kwok-yung, and his team from the HKU to inspect the concerned laboratory for the sake of prudence. In view of initial finding that there is a high possibility that the aforementioned cases pertain to "false positives", if the affected persons have been tested negative during isolation and tested negative for antibodies to COVID-19, they will be discharged from the hospital. Close contacts of these cases who were sent to quarantine facilities will also be allowed to leave the quarantine facilities if they are tested negative.

The Government is extremely concerned about this incident, and has taken resolute follow-up actions immediately. To safeguard the quality of community testing results, the CHP and the PHLSB will conduct investigation on the concerned private laboratory. The incident mainly involved specimens

collected from community testing centres (Siu Lun Community Hall and Ngau Tau Kok Road Sports Centre), mobile specimen collection stations (Yau Oi Estate in Tuen Mun and Sha Tsui Road Playground) on April 20, and specimens collected at a quarantine hotel. The scope of investigation will include the infection control of the laboratory and the specimen collection stations it operates, the test accuracy of the laboratory, and other relevant factors.

If the medical laboratory and its professional personnels are found to have violated relevant professional codes, the Government will report the case to the Medical Laboratory Technologists Board for follow-up actions. If the quality of service of the concerned testing service provider is found unsatisfactory, the Government will require the service provider to submit a report making improvement suggestions and follow up on its implementation of improvement measures, and consider appropriate punishment based on the severity of the incident in accordance with the terms and conditions of the relevant service contract.

The Government spokesman reminded again that there are still silent transmission chains in the community, with asymptomatic persons diagnosed as confirmed cases, the risk of infection in the community remains high. Local residents are encouraged to undergo testing as soon as possible even if they are not subject to compulsory testing. The mobile specimen collection stations located in different districts will continue to provide free testing services for all residents in the area (including persons subject to and not subject to compulsory testing). At the same time, if a person subject to compulsory testing has shown symptoms, he or she should seek medical advice immediately and be tested in accordance with the instructions of medical staff. They should not go to mobile specimen collection stations or community testing centres. The Government also urges the public to remain vigilant and pay attention to personal hygiene even after receiving a single negative test result. If they feel unwell, they should seek medical attention as soon as possible.