

FHB responds to media enquiries

In response to media enquiries on the Government's initiative to conduct COVID-19 tests for high risk groups, a spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) said on July 14:

"The epidemic situation in Hong Kong has undergone drastic changes recently, with the emergence of a number of local cases with unknown sources of infection over a short period of time. In view of the situation, the Government has decided to make use of the Anti-epidemic Fund to conduct large scale testing for designated high-risk groups, and to expand the overall testing capacity of Hong Kong accordingly.

With a view to targeting clusters of infection in various premises and sectors in the community, the Government has decided to immediately enhance COVID-19 tests for high risk groups in the community on a voluntary basis. These include staff of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) and nursing homes, taxi drivers, restaurant staff and frontline staff of the property management sector. The estimated number of individuals involved is around 400 000.

After liaising with the major private laboratories in Hong Kong, the Government noted that there are only three laboratories in the market that could provide the abovementioned testing services at a massive scale up to tens of thousands. The three laboratories are Sunrise Diagnostic Centre Limited established by BGI, China Inspection Company Limited and Prenetics.

As there is an urgent need to roll out large scale testing as soon as possible to protect public health, after considering the suitability of the testing service models for the actual operation of the relevant sectors provided by the relevant laboratories, the Government decided to directly procure testing services from Sunrise Diagnostic Centre and Prenetics under the Anti-epidemic Fund for voluntary testing of staff of RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes, taxi drivers and restaurant staff. The Hong Kong Association of Property Management Companies has also been discussing with China Inspection Company Limited to provide testing services for the property management sector, with subsidy from the Anti-epidemic Fund.

Such services provide a one-stop solution to cover procedures from specimen-taking to testing. The testing arrangements for different sectors vary. For instance, on-site specimen collection is more suitable for staff of residential homes, and the relevant logistics costs would be higher. Hence, the testing costs would vary across services for different sectors. In view of the large scale testing, testing would be conducted by phases, with the two groups with higher risks namely staff of RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes, and taxi drivers starting from this week. The relevant testing service costs are still under discussion with individual companies. The Government would review the testing costs to ensure that the procurement price is reasonable,

and will announce the details of use of funding in accordance with the requirements of the Anti-epidemic Fund at a later stage.

At the same time, the Department of Health (DH), through the connection of Hong Kong Association of Medical Laboratories (HKAML), has earlier procured testing services directly from five local private laboratories to enhance public testing capacity. The relevant private laboratories have started testing service for DH today, with a total capacity of handling about 1 000 specimens per day. To further expand the scope of testing, the Hospital Authority (HA) is exploring the possibility of setting up special counters at the general out-patient clinics to distribute deep throat saliva specimen bottles to persons with mild symptoms who wish to get tested. HKAML and the Government have reached a consensus that private laboratories would endeavor to assist DH and HA in providing more testing services if the testing capacity could be ramped up in the future, in order to alleviate the pressure on the public testing capacity.

The collection and use of any personal data for the purpose of voluntary COVID-19 tests should comply with the provisions of the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance. Government departments or testing agencies that process the relevant data will report to DH or other relevant departments on a need basis for the purpose of disease control. The workflow does not involve the provision of any personal data to any organisations or persons outside Hong Kong. We will also consider taking various measures to minimise the amount of personal data to be collected and accessed.

If the epidemic situation remains serious, the Government would not preclude the possibility of further procuring services directly from private laboratories in order to rapidly increase testing capacity of Hong Kong."