

General outpatient clinics help distribute specimen bottles

The following is issued on behalf of the Hospital Authority:

Amid the worsening coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic in Hong Kong, various clusters of local cases have been emerging in the community. To tie in with the Government's epidemic control strategy on early detection of occult infection to minimise the risk of community transmissions, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health has extended the "Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme" to provide COVID-19 test for individuals who perceive themselves to have higher risk of exposure and experience mild discomfort.

The spokesman of the Hospital Authority (HA) said, "to support the implementation of this new arrangement by CHP, 22 general out-patient clinics (GOPCs) of the HA (see appendix) will be available for the aforesaid members of the public to collect or return the specimen bottles free of charge from next Monday (July 27). This pilot voluntary test arrangement, tentatively scheduled for four weeks, will not involve any consultation services by doctors."

The HA spokesman remarked, "infection control is the prime consideration in the choice of clinics. GOPCs are typically limited in space while handling a large number of patients, a majority of which are elderly and chronic patients. In anticipation of a high participation rate of the programme, the specimen bottles will be distributed before the clinics' normal service hours to avoid affecting patient services and undue gathering at the clinics and the vicinity. The segregation of people collecting the specimen bottles and the clinic patients during service hours will reduce the risks of cross-infection. The clinics that distribute specimen collection pack are available in many districts for the convenience of the public. The choice of clinics has duly considered the availability of outdoor waiting area with better ventilation instead of inside the clinics. Clinics inside housing estates and shopping malls with high volume of pedestrian traffic are also avoided for infection control consideration."

Staff of the 22 GOPCs will distribute the specimen collection packs (including specimen collection bottle, packaging plastic bags, guidelines for collection of deep throat saliva samples, etc) between 7.30am and 8.30am from Monday to Friday (except public holidays) in the designated area outside the clinics. Only one pack will be distributed to each person while stocks last.

The HA spokesman added that each GOPC will distribute 110 specimen collection packs every day. The participant is required to return the deep throat saliva specimen with proper packaging within three working days, together with the necessary information for laboratory tests. The 22 GOPCs will have designated collection points outside the clinics for return of the

specimen bottle between 10am and 11am from Monday to Saturday.

"Overwhelmed by a large volume of tests for clinical diagnosis, public hospital laboratory service capacity is already saturated for the time being. The specimens collected by this programme will be handled by an accredited local laboratory. For specimens tested positive for COVID-19, the cases will be reported to the CHP for confirmation in accordance with prevailing mechanism. The participants concerned will be notified by CHP for admission to public hospitals for isolation as soon as possible. Participants should assume test result being negative if they do not receive notification in three working days after submitting the specimen."

The HA spokesman also appealed to the public to avoid unnecessary gatherings during the epidemic. For epidemic control and public safety, people are reminded to wear masks and maintain social distance while collecting or returning the specimens. Clinic staff will advise people at the end of the queue to leave and collect specimen collection packs on some other days or from other clinics, when there are too many people gathering at a particular clinic. The HA appealed for public understanding and cooperation towards the arrangements.