

Government announces enhanced measures for disease control

In response to the worsening situation of the novel coronavirus infection due to the rapid increase in the number of imported cases from abroad, major members of the Steering Committee cum Command Centre chaired by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, yesterday (March 21) met the four experts of the expert advisory panel for the second time this week. They decided after the meeting to implement a number of enhanced measures to reduce the risk of a large-scale outbreak in the community.

Strengthen testing programme for people returning Hong Kong

Taking into account that most of the recent confirmed cases are either imported cases and cases related to their close contacts or patients with a travel history during the incubation period, the Hospital Authority (HA) and the Department of Health (DH) will enhance tests for people returning to Hong Kong from overseas, with an aim to identify the patients early and minimise the risk of community transmission. The HA and the DH will fully utilise all resources for testing and adopt a risk-based approach to arrange more tests as far as possible. This includes providing more arrivals with specimen containers at the Hong Kong International Airport to require them to collect their deep throat saliva sample by themselves at residence in accordance with the instructions for testing. If a sample tests positive, the Centre for Health Protection will arrange for the person concerned to receive treatment as early as possible.

Adjustments to public services and temporary closures of some facilities

In view of the latest situation, the Government will once again adjust public services and make special work arrangements for civil servants to reduce social contacts. Starting next Monday, all government departments will provide essential, emergency and limited public services only. Enterprises are urged to make flexible work arrangements for employees to tie in with the Government strategy to fight the disease. Some of the public facilities that reopened earlier will be temporarily closed from next Monday, including leisure venues of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, public facilities of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, and community halls and community centres of the Home Affairs Department. Relevant authorities will make separate announcements on arrangements of public services and the opening of public facilities.

The Government hopes that members of the public will stay vigilant, avoid all non-essential travel outside Hong Kong, stay at home as much as possible and maintain an appropriate social distance from other people, especially refraining from attending such activities as meal gatherings or other gatherings. As some recent confirmed cases were suspected to be infected at bars, fitness centres and cinemas, the Government urges members

of the public to avoid going to these premises which may be of relatively high-risk and appeals to the relevant sectors to make adjustments for the sake of public health, lowering the risk of infection of customers.

Deferral of Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education examination

To protect students' health, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education examination scheduled to start on March 27 will be deferred to April 24 and is expected to be finished on May 25, and the speaking examinations of both Chinese and English language subjects will be cancelled. In addition, classes of all schools will remain suspended until further notice.

Stringent enforcement actions against contravention of quarantine order

Implementing the compulsory quarantine for people returning to Hong Kong from overseas is crucial to the prevention and control of the infection. The relevant departments will step up inspections and adopt "zero tolerance" towards those contravening the quarantine order. Immediate prosecution will be taken without any warning. Offenders are subject to a maximum fine of \$25,000 and imprisonment for six months. The Government strongly urges people under quarantine to exercise self-discipline to abide by the quarantine order, and not to defy the law.

Strengthening disease prevention at residential care homes for the elderly

As the elderly are of higher risk in contracting the disease, the Government will help residential care homes for the elderly and residential care homes for persons with disabilities to strengthen disease prevention. The Chief Executive has earlier on decided to provide one million surgical masks monthly to these institutions for use by the nursing staff, and that will now be doubled to 2 million monthly. In addition, the Social Welfare Department will arrange the spraying of an anti-bacteria coating developed by an innovation and technology team of a local university in the institutions to strengthen the prevention of the virus.

"More than seven million Hong Kong people have been fighting the disease together in the past two months, enabling Hong Kong to sail through the epidemic wave after wave. But the situation of increasing imported cases has presented Hong Kong with a challenge which is more severe than any moment in the past two months. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government will continue to tackle the disease in accordance with the principles of making prompt responses, staying alert and working in an open and transparent manner. I also urge members of the public to continue the efforts together to win the fight against the epidemic for Hong Kong," Mrs Lam said.