

Government clarifies notification arrangements for COVID-19 test result

In response to media enquiries and reports on the testing arrangements for confirmed cases number 7916 and number 8249 of COVID-19, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) clarified again as follows today (December 25):

According to the existing mechanism of the Department of Health (DH), specimens tested with a positive COVID-19 result based on virus testing in all laboratories in Hong Kong (including private medical laboratories and hospital laboratories under the Hospital Authority (HA)) are considered preliminary positive. Such cases must be referred to the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) as soon as possible for initiating follow-up actions in accordance with established procedures, and the specimens be transferred to Public Health Laboratory Services Branch for confirmatory tests. The relevant mechanism has been in use since COVID-19 was included as a statutorily notifiable infectious disease in January, which effectively ensures that all tests with positive results carried out by any means or for any purposes will be notified and followed up.

In the meantime, the Government has been taking a multi-pronged approach to strengthen surveillance and testing efforts in order to identify cases in the community as soon as possible and help cut the transmission chains. The Government provides free tests for members of the public through various channels, including public clinics and private doctors, for regular surveillance and early identification of confirmed cases. Such surveillance testing is not for private purposes (e.g. for work or travel certificates for individuals). The above-mentioned regular testing is handled and followed up by the DH and the HA. Any case that has been tested positive through regular testing will be followed up in accordance with the above-mentioned existing mechanism for handling to ensure that there will be no omissions and delays in processing.

Due to the relatively large number of tests conducted by the Government with negative results, the practice that has been adopted is that people who are tested negative will not be notified separately. Nonetheless, the Government understands that members of the public want to be notified of the results after taking the test. In response to public demand, the FHB, the DH and the HA have gradually improved their computer systems since the end of November in order to notify people who have been tested negative via SMS messages.

During the process of changing the computer system, due to technical problems in the relevant system, some people who obtained specimen bottles through private doctors have not received the SMS messages containing their negative test results after being tested. After discovering the above technical problems, the Government has immediately taken remedial measures and the problems are already resolved. After the system is rectified, individual citizens will receive SMS messages containing the earlier test

results which are generated by the system automatically. The technical problems mentioned above are resolved and not related to the outsourcing of the laboratory testing work.

Since the end of November when the computer system was being improved and that specimen bottles with standardised barcodes were distributed through private doctors, designated General Out-patient Clinics of the HA, post offices and MTR stations, the Government has issued over 250 000 SMS messages containing negative test results. Due to the technical problem mentioned above, it is estimated about 800 people (including case number 7916 and case number 8249) have failed to receive SMS messages containing their negative test results, and there is no positive case among them. There was no existence about any delay in treatment due to SMS messages not being sent out.

At present, people will receive SMS messages containing their negative test results if they receive free testing at community testing centres, or obtain specimen bottles through private doctors, designated General Out-patient Clinics of the HA, post offices and MTR stations and return the specimen samples for testing. We will continue to improve the system so that people receiving tests can be notified of the test results via SMS messages within 48 hours as far as possible. We would like to emphasise that the SMS notification arrangement is designed to inform members of the public of negative test results and give them peace of mind. All positive cases are notified and followed up in accordance with the aforementioned existing mechanism of the CHP for separate handling as soon as possible. The handling of these cases will not be affected by the SMS notification system and the time of sending out messages.