

Government clarifies rumours on Internet regarding procurement of Mainland vaccines

In response to rumours on the social media that the Government's procurement of COVID-19 vaccines is a political decision for transfer of benefits to the Mainland or individual companies, a Government spokesman on December 14 firmly refuted such rumours and pointed out that the Government's procurement of vaccines is solely based on prevailing scientific evidence and that our goal is to provide as early as possible the safest and most effective vaccines for the entire Hong Kong population. The relevant rumours are completely unfounded. The rumour mongers act with evil intentions in disregard of public interest. The Government expresses deep regret over the malicious act of spreading rumours targeting affairs concerning public health.

The Government has earlier made an announcement in September this year that it would adopt a "two-pronged" strategy to procure vaccines for protecting against COVID-19 for the entire Hong Kong population. The Government has on one hand joined the COVAX Facility led by the World Health Organization (WHO), and at the same time directly entered into advance purchase agreements with individual vaccine developers for obtaining greater supplies of vaccines at an earlier time. The purpose of signing advance purchase agreements is to reserve in advance vaccines which have a higher chance of success for Hong Kong citizens, notwithstanding that the vaccines are still in the development process and have yet to obtain approval from the relevant local regulatory authorities.

As indicated by information by the WHO in the public domain, COVID-19 vaccines are mainly developed from four different technology platforms, including inactivated, viral vector, nucleic acid and protein subunit. The Government has consulted the Joint Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases and the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases under the Department of Health (membership list of the committee can be found on the website of the Centre for Health Protection: www.chp.gov.hk/en/static/24002.html) and the Government's four experts on anti-epidemic efforts regarding the above technology platforms and the candidate vaccines from each of the technology platforms which have basically entered into phase 3 clinical trial. The experts took the view that each technology platform has its merits. The experts also understood that the Government should procure candidate vaccines developed from different vaccine manufacturers and from different technology platforms. It should also procure sufficient doses to cover for at least two times the Hong Kong population, with a view to diversifying risks and ensuring sufficient supplies of vaccines for the whole of Hong Kong.

The developers/manufacturers of the three vaccines now purchased by the Government are respectively Sinovac Biotech (Hong Kong) Limited (inactivated

virus vaccine), Fosun Pharma/German drug developer BioNTech (nucleic acid vaccine) and AstraZeneca/University of Oxford (viral vector vaccine). These vaccines are frontrunners in terms of the progress of scientific research and technology development and clinical trials from the three respective technology platforms. The Government's decision on procurement of the relevant vaccines is reached after having made reference to the experts' views on candidate vaccines and having considered factors such as the quantity and timing of supply, logistics and storage methods, etc. The decision on procurement of vaccines is made based on the considerations of safety, efficacy, quality and supply, and does not in any way involve political factors.

A Government spokesman stressed, "In order to ensure the safety, efficacy and quality of the vaccines, all vaccines must first satisfy the relevant procedures, including completion of phase 3 clinical trials and obtaining emergency use approval by the drug regulatory authority of the local jurisdiction and Hong Kong under the emergency legislation under preparation. As the global competition for vaccines is extremely vigorous, the supply in the initial stage will be tight. The Government will on one hand strive for the early delivery for the vaccines to Hong Kong while continuing to negotiate advance purchase agreements with vaccine developers; and on the other hand, having regard to the latest scientific evidence and clinical data, continue to consult the experts for finalising the detailed arrangements for the vaccination programme, in order for members of the public to receive vaccination as early as possible."

The Government expresses deep regret over the spread of false information or attempts to politicise issues on public health, which severely affect society's solidarity in combating the epidemic. To strengthen the public's confidence towards vaccines, the Government will continue to step up transparency on information dissemination. Members of the public may visit the websites of the WHO and the Government to obtain accurate information on vaccines.