

Government continues to strengthen support for health and medical research

With regard to some recent media reports on the Government's funding support for infectious diseases-related research, the Health Bureau (HHB) today (December 20) emphasised that the Government has all along been highly supportive of local health and medical sector to conduct health and medical research (including those related to infectious diseases), and provides comprehensive and dedicated support for health and medical research projects, research infrastructure and research capacity building in Hong Kong through setting up the Health and Medical Research Fund (HMRF).

After the 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the Government has set up the Research Fund for the Control of Infectious Diseases (RFCID) with a commitment of \$450 million to encourage, facilitate and support research on the prevention, treatment and control of infectious diseases, in particular emerging infectious diseases, for example those relating to SARS and avian influenza (H5N1) research. It has also supported the establishment of the biosafety level 3 (BL-3) laboratory for handling highly pathogenic agents to enhance the capacity of the university in conducting research on emerging infectious diseases in a safe and controlled environment and to establish the capacity in conducting advanced research on infectious diseases in Hong Kong.

In 2011, the Government established the HMRF by consolidating the HMRF and the RFCID. Funding commitment has been increased repeatedly and the approved amount has increased to \$4,223 million to support government commissioned programmes and investigator-initiated projects. Among them, those related to infectious diseases research amount to \$1,200 million covering:

- Six commissioned programmes on infectious diseases with approved funding of \$792 million, covering COVID-19, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), influenza, avian flu, swine flu and other respiratory infectious diseases, human papilloma virus and anti-microbial resistance research.
- The commissioned programmes above include a total of \$556 million since April 2020 to support 105 individual COVID-19 related research studies from bench to bedside and at the community level through application of new technologies. These studies provide new evidence to support the Government to promptly tackle the COVID-19 epidemic by formulating health policies, identifying the transmission chains, implementing control measures, improving the clinical management, as well as developing and promoting the vaccination programme. One of the research

projects successfully developed the sewage testing approach for quantitative detection of SARS-CoV-2, providing an important indicator for the Government to keep track of the virus activity in the community during the COVID-19 epidemic.

- For investigator-initiated projects, researchers are encouraged to submit research proposals according to the thematic priorities in which infectious disease has always been one of the priorities. As of end September 2024, a total of about 400 research studies have been funded amounting to \$424 million covering prevention, detection, diagnosis and management of various infectious diseases, like hepatitis virus, tuberculosis, AIDS, and those related to preparedness and response to pandemic and epidemic.

The Government encourages researchers to continue to leverage the HMRF to amplify the value of their research projects into full play and usher in considerable and sustainable positive impacts on health policy making and implementation with their research outcomes and to unleash new quality productive forces. On combating infectious diseases, the Government will continue to support the health and medical sector in conducting related research in order to enhance the capacity in surveillance, early detection, prevention and control.