

Government explains COVID-19 testing arrangements for target groups

In response to press enquiries on the Government's COVID-19 testing arrangements for target groups, a Government spokesman said the following on August 5:

Since early July, the third wave of the epidemic situation of COVID-19 in Hong Kong has remained severe. The number of confirmed cases has increased sharply and there are numerous local cases of unknown infection source. The risk of large-scale community outbreaks poses a serious health threat to the society and members of the public.

In this connection and with a view to targeting clusters of infection in various premises and sectors in the community, relevant Government departments have made use of the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) since mid-July to help groups with higher-risks to undergo voluntary and one-off virus tests. Currently, the schemes cover staff members of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and nursing homes, staff of boarding section of special schools, taxi and public light bus drivers, restaurant staff, market tenants and workers, as well as frontline staff of the property management sector. The estimated number of individuals involved is around 500 000.

As of August 4, the three private testing service providers that provide testing services for the Government (i.e. Sunrise Diagnostic Centre (SDC) established by BGI, China Inspection Company Limited's subsidiary China Dragon Inspection and Certification (Hong Kong) Limited (CDIC) and Prenetics) had carried out more than 90 000 tests for the aforementioned groups and 31 preliminary positive samples were found.

In view of the large number of people in the higher-risk groups and that the public testing system would not be able to provide the required testing volume within a short period of time, there was a need for the Government to resort to the private testing services. Before the launch of the schemes, the Government had contacted various local major private testing service providers and found that only SDC, CDIC and Prenetics would be able to provide testing services at a massive scale up to tens of thousands within a relatively short period of time.

As there was an urgent need to roll out large-scale testing as soon as possible to safeguard public health, after considering whether the suitability of the testing service models for the actual operation of the relevant sectors provided by the relevant laboratories, the Government decided to procure testing services from the three providers by direct procurement with funding from the AEF. With the worsening epidemic situation, a service provider decided to partner with another private laboratory with a view to launching its testing service early so as to meet the service volume

required by the Government in advance.

Such services provide a one-stop solution to cover procedures from specimen-taking to testing. The testing arrangements for different sectors vary. For instance, on-site specimen collection is more suitable for staff of residential homes, and the relevant logistics costs will be higher. Hence, the testing costs would vary across services for different sectors. The Government will examine the relevant testing costs so as to ensure that procurement price is reasonable, and will announce the details of use of funding in accordance with the requirements of the AEF later. Depending on whether door-to-door sample collection is required and the logistic work involved, the charge for each test starts from about \$300. In view of the unstable epidemic situation, the Government will need to procure more private testing services. As the Government is still in discussion with different service providers, it is inappropriate to make public the fee details of individual service providers at this stage to avoid affecting further discussion and procurement.

Statutory requirements of medical laboratories and relevant professionals as well as quality of COVID-19 tests

All local laboratories, including the private laboratories providing COVID-19 tests for the Government, must abide by the relevant local legislation, especially the statutory requirements for medical laboratories and the related professionals. In addition, all participating private laboratories must subscribe to and pass the External Quality Assessment Programme of the Department of Health (DH) to ensure they meet the required technical standards before commencing the testing service. All laboratories used by the service providers which provide testing services for the Government must meet the above requirements ahead of commencement of testing. DH has also provided safety guidelines on transporting clinical samples and contagious matters to the laboratories, which provide testing services to the higher-risk groups for the Government, for their reference.

Importing Mainland technical staff by laboratories and compulsory quarantine exemption arrangement

As there is a lack of local testing staff with suitable training and experience in COVID-19 tests, individual private testing service providers have applied to introduce suitable technical staff from the Mainland for supporting their work in COVID-19 testing. As mentioned above, the relevant private laboratories must abide by the relevant local legislation, including the statutory requirements for medical laboratories and the related professions. Any imported staff must meet the registration or exemption requirements under the applicable legislation if they want to provide service in the relevant professional capacity of medical laboratory technologists (MLTs). However, other technical staff members who provide operational support in the medical laboratories are not so required if they do not work as MLTs as statutorily regulated. The medical laboratories and relevant

professionals must abide by the professional code of conduct and ensure the laboratory operation is in compliance with the requirements under the code.

Under section 4(1) of the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap. 599C), the Chief Secretary for Administration may designate any person or category of persons fulfilling certain criteria for exemption of compulsory quarantine. Personnel of the companies or organisations for the supply of COVID-19 testing services in Hong Kong is one of such categories. As of August 4, a total of 215 persons had been exempted under this category. During their stay in Hong Kong, these persons are put under medical surveillance. They have to wear a surgical mask and take body temperature daily. If they feel unwell, they have to report to DH. The seven advance members of the Mainland nucleic acid testing support team who arrived at Hong Kong on August 2 had obtained negative result from a nucleic acid test done within 72 hours prior to arrival.

Handling of personal data

Any collection and use of personal data for carrying out voluntary COVID-19 tests must meet the requirements under the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance (Cap. 486). Government departments or testing service providers may provide the data to DH or other relevant departments for anti-epidemic needs as necessary. The workflow does not involve the provision of any personal data to organisations or persons outside Hong Kong. The Government has also taken measures to minimise the personal data that need to be collected and streamline the work that need to come into contact with such data.