

Government subsidises third batch of COVID-19 research

The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) and the Research Council chaired by the Secretary for Food and Health announced today (September 13) that a further \$343 million has been approved to support local universities to conduct research studies on COVID-19. This is the third batch of funding in addition to a total of \$170 million approved under the Health and Medical Research Fund (HMRF) for 49 applications as announced on April 27 and August 5 last year.

The 18 newly approved studies, some of which comprise portfolios of multiple projects, will address a wide range of health-related issues to better prepare Hong Kong for the recovery stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies include evaluation of vaccine-induced immune response and vaccination safety for different groups including young adolescents, adults, the elderly and cohorts receiving booster vaccinations, as well as comparison of the immune status in naturally infected and vaccinated cohorts; research on the role of gut microbiota in enhancing immune response to vaccination; surveys on knowledge, confidence and acceptance of vaccination and social and behavioural interventions to reduce the spread of novel coronavirus in different community groups.

The Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, said, "A total of \$513 million has been approved to support 67 COVID-19 research studies from bench to bedside and at the community level through application of new technologies. With the joint efforts from academia, healthcare professionals and government departments, these research studies have been contributing to our ongoing anti-pandemic efforts, thus strengthening community resilience amidst the pandemic."

These research studies address important research areas related to immune status, response to vaccination and the physical and mental consequences of "long COVID" (i.e. persistent, delayed or long-term complications of COVID-19 infection). Among them, research findings on the strength, breadth and duration of vaccine-induced immune responses, real-time surveillance of adverse events and clinical trials of different combinations of vaccination can help inform booster strategies. To allow further understanding of "long COVID" and improve the quality of life of COVID-19 recoverers, there are studies covering detection of new onset of chronic diseases and long-term neuropsychiatric sequelae in the recoverers, development and evaluation of new pharmaceutical and self-management approaches.

"Early results of some studies show that both the Comirnaty and CoronaVac vaccines are highly effective in protecting the vaccinated population by preventing severe cases and death from COVID-19. The projections based on regular population surveys on vaccination have

highlighted the need to increase vaccination uptake rates in the elderly through facilitating measures. Meanwhile, genomic sequencing of mutant variants isolated from clinical and environmental samples (such as sewage) will provide useful and timely information on reviewing quarantine arrangements of local COVID-19 cases with mutant strains, vaccine performance and clinical management," Professor Chan added.

Interim results of these studies will be presented by the project teams at the Health Research Symposium 2021 to be held on November 23. The Symposium has the theme of "Implementing evidence-based research in the era of COVID-19 and other global health challenges". Renowned overseas keynote speakers will discuss their experience in research on COVID-19 and implementing research findings in clinical practice at the Symposium.

Professor Chan expressed her thanks and appreciation to members of the Research Council and Assessment Panels who have contributed their precious time and efforts in supporting the commissioning of these important studies.

The HMRF supports studies and projects initiated by individual investigators as well as those commissioned by the FHB with a view to building research capacity, filling knowledge gaps, supporting policy formulation, addressing specific issues, assessing needs and threats, conducting health promotion, and more. For studies and projects commissioned by the FHB, relevant institutions will be invited by the bureau to submit a research/project portfolio for consideration based on their research expertise.

Details of the [approved studies on COVID-19](#) and the [Health Research Symposium 2021](#) can be found in Annexes 1 and 2, and are also available at the HMRF website (rfs.fhb.gov.hk).