

Government takes proactive co-ordination to assist next of kin to handle bodies of the deceased

To better assist the next of kin to claim bodies of their deceased family members early for handling after-death arrangements, various government departments have been taking proactive co-ordination to expedite matters arising from the rapid increase in deaths during the epidemic, such as body storage, identification and cremation.

According to the statistics of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), about 93 per cent of the bodies stored earlier in the body storage facility at Fu Shan Public Mortuary in Sha Tin have either been cremated, or have cremation sessions booked in or before the second week of May. As a matter of fact, the FEHD has progressively increased the daily cremation sessions available for booking since February. With the advanced commissioning of the two new cremators at Wo Hop Shek Crematorium, the number of daily cremation sessions has been maintained at over 300 since April 10. All crematoria have been in operation almost round-the-clock, except for the Cheung Chau Crematorium with very low utilisation. The FEHD also made an exceptional arrangement to maintain the operation of all crematoria on the day of Ching Ming Festival this year. Currently, there are sufficient cremation sessions available for booking. Since April 9, the cremation dates available on booking system have been extended from the next 15 days to the next 20 days. At the same time, the FEHD has also been appealing to the funeral trade to accord priority to the handling of the bodies kept in the storage facility. Members for the public may call the FEHD hotline 2867 5516 or 2867 5518 if they have any enquiries or would like to seek assistance on after-death arrangements.

In view of the recent demand for service halls at funeral parlours, the FEHD has proactively approached the seven licensed funeral parlours. It is learnt that only service halls for weekends and public holidays in the coming two weeks have almost been fully booked in a small number of funeral parlours. Overall speaking, there are still around 45 per cent of service halls available for booking. The FEHD has uploaded the information of the licensed funeral parlours (including the number of service halls in operation) on its webpage (www.fehd.gov.hk/english/cc/notice_lfp_info.html) on April 22 to facilitate after-death arrangements by bereaved families. It is understood that the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals is exploring to make regular announcements on the number of service halls available for booking in the next 30 days or so at its three funeral parlours and will release details at an appropriate time.

Regarding the storage of bodies, the capacity of storage facilities has been increased to more than 6 200 spaces through co-operation among various government departments. The Department of Health (DH) will store the bodies

upon receipt at the public mortuaries or body storage facilities where constant temperature is maintained. All cooling facilities of the DH have been operating normally, with the temperature in compliance with international standard (i.e. around 4 degrees Celsius). The DH staff members carry out regular check of the temperature of storage facilities daily and have already taken appropriate measures such as installing screens at the doors of refrigerated containers in order to further slow down the decomposition of the bodies. However, storage facilities are generally designed for short-term storage of dead bodies and the bodies of some deceased patients at Accident and Emergency Departments (A&EDs) might have developed decomposition changes before transfer to public mortuaries or storage facilities. Storing a body at a cold storage facility over a long period will inevitably cause further deterioration of the facial and overall appearance of the deceased.

Separately, the DH has deliberated with the Coroner's Court and the Police to devise measures and had the identification procedures for over 1 800 bodies transferred from the A&EDs of public hospitals to the body storage facility at Fu Shan Public Mortuary in Sha Tin completed during the period from March to early April. Certificates of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body were also issued by the Coroner. The DH has recently called next of kin of the deceased and urged them to collect Certificates of Order Authorizing Burial/Cremation of Body as soon as possible so that they can make funeral arrangement for the deceased.