

Hong Kong Customs arrests pharmacy director and salespersons suspected of supplying surgical masks with false trade description (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs today (June 5) searched four pharmacies in Mong Kok and Tsuen Wan and seized 464 boxes containing a total of 23 200 surgical masks with a suspected false description of the distributor's address. A director and three salespersons of the pharmacies involved were arrested for suspected violation of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO). Customs appeals to members of the public to stop using the surgical mask concerned since its source is unknown.

Customs earlier received information alleging that one type of surgical mask labelled with "USA Face Mask" supplied by a pharmacy was suspected of bearing a false description of the distributor's address. A test-buy operation and follow-up investigation were conducted upon receiving the allegation.

Customs sent the test-bought sample to the laboratory for tests on bacterial counts and test results revealed that the sample is in compliance with the bacterial count standard. However, investigation revealed that the information about the distributor was a false claim. Customs officers today conducted enforcement action and searched four pharmacies in Mong Kok and Tsuen Wan concurrently. A total of 464 boxes of surgical masks with the suspected false description of the distributor's address were seized. The mask was packed in boxes of 50 pieces each and was sold for \$100. The three men and one woman arrested in the operation, aged between 30 and 39, have been released on bail for further investigation.

Investigation of the case is ongoing and the likelihood of further arrests is not excluded.

Customs again reminds members of the public to observe the following tips when purchasing surgical masks:

- Pay attention to the product descriptions shown on labels, including the manufacturing date and the validity period;
- Check the packaging of surgical masks to see if there is any damage and if the masks have any stains or odd smells. Do not make purchases if in doubt;
- Check with the shopkeepers immediately when there is any doubt; and
- Purchase surgical masks at reputable retail shops.

This enforcement action is part of the "Guardian" operation, which has been running for more than four months since its launch on January 27. About

5 000 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 33 000 inspections at retail spots in various districts to ensure that common protective items sold in the market comply with the TD0 and the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO).

Under the TD0, any person who supplies goods with a false trade description in the course of trade or business, or is in possession of any goods for sale with a false trade description, commits an offence. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$500,000 and imprisonment for five years.

Under the CGSO, it is an offence to import, manufacture or supply consumer goods unless the goods comply with the general safety requirements for consumer goods. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$100,000 and imprisonment for one year on first conviction, and \$500,000 and imprisonment for two years on a subsequent conviction.

Members of the public may report any suspected violation of the TD0 or the CGSO to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account (crimereport@customs.gov.hk).

