

Hong Kong Customs consecutively smashes supply and sale chains of disinfectant alcohol with suspected false trade description and methanol

As a result of swift action and extensive investigations, Hong Kong Customs in recent months smashed two supply and sale chains of disinfectant alcohol with a suspected false trade description and toxic methanol content. A total of 20 persons, including suppliers, persons-in-charge and salespersons of the pharmacies, were arrested from late February to today (March 13). During the operations, 284 bottles of disinfectant alcohol with a suspected false trade description were seized. A dual-approach investigation according to the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO) and the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO) is underway.

Customs earlier received information alleging the sale of disinfectant alcohol with a suspected false description on its composition at a pharmacy in Tuen Mun. Customs officers were then deployed for immediate action to test-purchase a type of disinfectant alcohol labelled as "75% ethanol" and "1 litre" at a shop of the pharmacy group involved. Test results revealed that the disinfectant alcohol concerned consists of less than 0.1 per cent of ethanol, while its methanol content reaches 52 per cent. The test also revealed that its net volume was only 737 millilitres. According to the test results, the product involved was suspected to be in contravention of the TDO and the CGSO.

Noting the test results, Customs conducted immediate enforcement action on the following day (February 21) and searched the pharmacy group's office and its 20 branches across the territory. A total of 236 retail spots in various districts were also searched concurrently. During the operation on that day, a total of 174 bottles of disinfectant alcohol with a suspected false description on its composition were seized at the branches, with arrests of a director and six salespersons of the pharmacy group.

After an in-depth investigation, Customs conducted a series of arrest operations between the end of February and today. Five directors of the pharmacy group as well as three primary suppliers were further arrested. The entire supply and sale chain of disinfectant alcohol with a suspected false trade description and toxic methanol content has been smashed. The 15 arrested persons have been released on bail pending further investigation.

In another case, Customs test-purchased a type of antibacterial disinfectant labelled as containing "75% ethanol" and claims of complying with the relevant national standard at a pharmacy in Fanling. Test results revealed that the antibacterial disinfectant concerned consisted of 69 per cent of ethanol and was mixed with 8.2 per cent of methanol content. The product was put on sale in transparent plastic bottles labelled as 500 ml but

the test revealed that the net volume was only 478 ml.

Customs noted the test results on March 2 and conducted immediate enforcement action on the same day. A total of 110 bottles of disinfectant alcohol with suspected false descriptions on composition and toxic methanol content were seized at four targeted pharmacies. A director and three pharmacy salespersons were arrested. Customs officers also inspected a total of 314 retail spots in various districts on March 2 and arrested the person-in-charge of a trading company in Kwun Tong two days later who supplied the relevant product to the pharmacies in connection with the case. The five arrested persons have been released on bail pending further investigation. Including this case, Customs has consecutively smashed two supply and sale chains of disinfectant alcohol suspected of violating relevant ordinances in less than a month.

Customs said the two cases share four common features: (1) swift action – immediate test-purchases were conducted after receiving information and immediate actions were taken after noting the test results; (2) extensiveness – apart from targeted search operations on relevant shops, large-scale territory-wide inspections were also conducted concurrently to stop the sale of suspected illegal products in the market; (3) cutting off the source of supply – operations were carried out at retail spots in the beginning and then the investigation scope was proceeded upstream to cover the entire supply and sale chain; (4) dual-approach investigation – the two cases were investigated according to the TD0 and the CGS0.

The department has passed the disinfectant alcohol seized in the cases to the Government Laboratory for further examination.

The series of operations is part of the "Guardian" operation, which has been running for 46 days as of yesterday (March 12) since its launch on January 27. More than 3 200 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 22 000 inspections at retail spots in various districts to ensure that common protective items sold in the market comply with the TD0 and the CGS0.

Apart from that, Customs has also conducted spot checks, test purchases and inspections in various districts on surgical masks available in the market. More than 90 samples have been test-purchased. The first two batches of 40 samples in total passed the tests on bacterial counts in February, while the test results of the third batch of 20 samples also revealed compliance with the bacterial count standard.

Customs also test-purchased over 10 samples of alcohol-based hand rubs available in the market and have conducted tests for the 10 samples on heavy metals and bacterial counts. All samples comply with safety requirements and no violations of the CGS0 have yet been found. The department will continue to make prompt public updates if irregularities are detected.

The "Guardian" operation is ongoing. Customs will continue to take a speedy and holistic approach to suppress the supply and sale chains of anti-epidemic items violating relevant ordinances.