

Hong Kong Customs' "Operation Guardian" combats unfair trade practices by pharmacy in normal saline sale (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs started a large-scale territory-wide special operation codenamed "Guardian" on January 27 to inspect retail spots throughout Hong Kong that sell surgical masks and other common protective items. During a spot-check yesterday (February 13), a test-buy was made at a pharmacy in Mong Kok. One salesperson and one director were arrested on suspicion of engaging in unfair trade practices in the sale of normal saline, in contravention of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO). During the operation, 23 bottles of normal saline with an estimated market value of about \$575 were seized.

The operation was planned following the discovery that some pharmacies in Mong Kok were suspected of engaging in unfair trade practices in their sale of normal saline. Officers were deployed to conduct test-buy operations at different pharmacies. At the above-mentioned pharmacy, normal saline in plastic bottles labelled as "0.9% sodium chloride" and "solution for irrigation" were put on sale in a carton. Each bottled in containers of 1 000 milliliters, the normal saline was sold at a price of \$25 per bottle and five for \$100. A self-added leaflet, claiming that the normal saline could be used for hand and floor cleaning, was found putting on the carton. The description on the leaflet is not in line with the product description on the bottle, a suspected violation of the TDO.

Custom officers immediately arrested a 30-year-old male salesperson, followed by a further arrest of a 30-year-old male director.

An investigation is ongoing and the normal saline seized will be taken to the Government Laboratory to establish its composition and safety.

The "Guardian" operation has been running out for 18 days as of yesterday. More than 1 900 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 12 000 inspections at retail spots in various districts to ensure that common protective items sold in the market comply with the TDO and the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO).

The operation will continue and Customs will carry on stepping up enforcement actions to combat activities that are in violation of the relevant ordinances. The department will continue to make prompt public updates if irregularities are detected.

Customs sternly reminds traders not to take advantage of the current situation and not to sell products using unfair trade practices. They must also not sell products with false origins or false trademarks, nor must they

sell unsafe consumer goods. Immediate law enforcement actions will be taken and prosecutions will be made with sufficient evidence.

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, or sells or possesses for sale any goods with a forged trademark, 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.

Customs also reminds consumers to purchase products from reputable shops. Apart from paying attention to the information given by a salesperson, they should also inspect the product description carefully and keep the transaction receipt. 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).

