

LC Urgent Q1: Issuing expeditiously guidelines on treating viral pneumonia

Following is an urgent question by the Hon Alice Mak under Rule 24(4) of the Rules of Procedure and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 8):

Question:

Recently, several dozen cases of viral pneumonia have occurred in Wuhan. As the cause of the disease is unknown, quite a number of Hong Kong people are in panic. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council of the disease's latest pathological information that it has grasped so far (including the causes of the disease, symptoms, transmissibility and treatment methods), and whether it will expeditiously issue to healthcare personnel work guidelines on treating such disease and provide them with adequate protection measures?

Reply:

President,

The Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health received notifications from the National Health Commission (NHC) on December 31, 2019 and January 3 and 5, 2020 respectively regarding the cluster of pneumonia cases recently identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province. According to the NHC, a number of viral pneumonia cases with unknown cause have been identified through disease surveillance since December 2019. Symptoms were mainly fever while a few had presented with shortness of breath.

According to the latest information available, there was a total of 59 cases, with no fatal cases (as of January 5, 2020). At present, all patients are receiving treatment in isolation, while 163 close contacts are under medical surveillance. So far none of them have developed abnormal symptoms such as fever. The tracing of close contacts is still ongoing. Epidemiological investigations reveal that some patients are business operators at a seafood market in Wuhan. So far, investigations by the Mainland authorities found no evidence of definite human-to-human transmission and no healthcare workers have been found infected. While the causative pathogen and cause of infection are still under investigation, respiratory pathogens such as influenza viruses, avian influenza viruses, adenovirus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome have been ruled out as the cause.

First of all, I would like to reiterate that no serious pneumonia case related to those in Wuhan has been detected in Hong Kong so far. Due to the frequent flow of travellers between Hong Kong and Wuhan, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region attaches great importance and stays alert of the latest situation of the cluster of pneumonia cases in

Wuhan. In tackling the outbreak, the Government adopts three principles, namely making prompt responses, staying alert and working in an open and transparent manner. In fact, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) has held a number of meetings with relevant policy bureaux, departments, the Hospital Authority (HA) and experts over the past week (since December 31, 2019) to examine the prevention measures taken in Hong Kong in response to the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province. Relevant departments have also been reminded to increase their vigilance and be well-prepared to ensure that relevant contingency measures could be implemented as early as possible when necessary to safeguard public health. Besides, the FHB has held a number of press conferences to provide the public with immediate updates on the development of the disease and the work of the Government. The Government's work in response to the disease includes:

(1) strengthen health measures at ports, as well as various government venues and facilities;

(2) launched on January 4, 2020 the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance, with the Serious Response Level activated with immediate effect;

(3) published in the Gazette today an amendment to the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap. 599) (the Ordinance) to include "Severe Respiratory Disease associated with a Novel Infectious Agent" as a statutorily notifiable infectious disease set out in Schedule 1 of the Ordinance through the Prevention and Control of Disease (Amendment) Regulation 2020 and the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Amendment of Schedule 1) Notice 2020, thereby vesting the Department of Health with the statutory powers to, among other things, put the contacts under quarantine and isolate the infected patients;

(4) activated the Serious Response Level in public hospitals on January 4, 2020, and the HA has implemented a series of response measures to enhance monitoring and infection control in public hospitals and clinics;

(5) enhance risk communication at all fronts including all local stakeholders, Mainland authorities and the World Health Organization.

I will introduce the measures in detail in my oral reply to the urgent questions.

Regarding the Hon Alice Mak's question, while there is currently no full understanding of the cause of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, the HA's frontline healthcare staff would provide appropriate treatment having regard to the clinical condition and testing results of patients, and would carry out response measures with the availability of further information. The HA's frontline healthcare staff would conduct risk assessment on its patients in accordance with its the HA's established clinical criteria, i.e. fever, travel record, occupation, contact history and whether there is clustering phenomenon. The HA has reminded frontline healthcare staff to pay special attention. Patients with the presentation of fever and acute respiratory infection or pneumonia, who have been to Wuhan within 14 days before onset of

symptoms, would immediately be sent to negative pressure isolation room for treatment. Airborne, droplet and contact precautions would be implemented on these cases, and healthcare staff would wear appropriate personal protective equipment with regard to relevant precautionary measures.