

LC Urgent Q2: Immediate measures to curb spread of epidemic in Hong Kong

Following is an urgent question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat 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:

Several dozens of pneumonia cases with unknown causes have occurred recently in Wuhan, and there have been successive reported cases in Hong Kong of persons with a travel history to Wuhan showing related symptoms. In this connection, will the Government immediately raise the response level further, issue a travel alert for Wuhan, and step up the work on epidemic notification with the Mainland?

Reply:

President,

In reply to the question raised by the Hon Alice Mak, I have briefly reported the latest development of the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province and the major areas of work undertaken by the Government over the past week. Now, I am going to elaborate Government's preparedness and response plan and relevant work on liaison with the Mainland on the disease.

Activation of Serious Response Level

In view of the latest situation of the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province, the Government devised the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance (the Plan) last week. The Plan was launched on January 4, 2020, with the Serious Response Level activated with immediate effect.

The Plan sets out the Government's preparedness and response plan in case of an outbreak of Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance where a three-tier response level is adopted. Three response levels, namely Alert, Serious and Emergency, will be activated based on the risk assessment of the Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance that may affect Hong Kong and its health impact on the community.

Upon the risk assessment of the cluster of cases of viral pneumonia with unknown cause in Wuhan reported by the National Health Commission (NHC), the Serious Response Level was activated, under which the immediate health impact caused by Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance on local population is moderate.

To enhance the overall preparedness and response for public health crises for communicable diseases with public health significance, the Department of Health (DH) has developed contingency plans and conducted

exercises and drills to test the capacity of relevant government departments and organisations to cope with possible major outbreaks of infectious diseases and public health emergencies, in order to enhance the awareness, preparedness and the ability of the community and healthcare personnel to detect and respond to possible epidemics. As a communicable disease could be caused by a pathogen currently unknown to cause human disease, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP), in collaboration with many other government departments and organisations, held a public health drill exercise code-named "Sunstone" to test the Government's capacity regarding a novel disease in June 2018.

Travel Health Advice

Regarding travel alerts, the Outbound Travel Alert (OTA) System set up by the Security Bureau (SB) aims to help people better understand the possible risk or threat to personal safety in travelling to [88 countries/territories](#) that are popular travel destinations for Hong Kong residents, which do not include the Mainland. When there are incidents in these countries/territories which may affect the personal safety of Hong Kong residents, the SB will assess and consider the need to issue an OTA taking into account factors such as the nature (e.g. whether it is targeted at travellers), level and duration of the threat. Should there be public health reasons, based on the alert level as advised by the Food and Health Bureau and the CHP of the DH, the SB will issue an OTA on countries/territories which are seriously affected by infectious diseases to help the public better understand the possible health risks.

As a matter of fact, based on the available information, the World Health Organization has advised against the application of any travel or trade restrictions on China, and has not recommended any specific measures for travellers. In case of symptoms suggestive of respiratory illness either during or after travel, travellers are encouraged to seek medical attention and share travel history with healthcare personnel. To provide more information for the public's attention when travelling outside Hong Kong, the SB has uploaded the travel health advice from the DH onto its webpage on OTA.

Liaison with the Mainland

As regards the liaison and communication with the Mainland, the Government has been maintaining close liaison with the Mainland authorities on various fronts. As early as in 2005, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region signed a "Co-operation Agreement on Response Mechanism for Public Health Emergencies" with the Mainland's former Ministry of Health and the Secretariat for Social Affairs and Culture of the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region. The CHP has been maintaining close liaison with the NHC under the established mechanism which requires Hong Kong and the Mainland to notify one another on surveillance data on infectious diseases, emergency public health incidents and responses to major infectious diseases. The CHP will continue to maintain close liaison with the NHC and closely monitor the latest development of the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan. The CHP will timely update the surveillance

criteria and testing strategies in accordance with the latest situation, and provide health information for the public in a timely manner.