

LC Urgent Q2: Measures for tackling novel coronavirus outbreak

Following is an urgent question by Dr the Hon Kwok Ka-ki under Rule 24(4) of the Rules of Procedure and a reply by the Chief Secretary for Administration, Mr Matthew Cheung Kin-chung, in the Legislative Council today (February 19):

Question:

As the novel coronavirus epidemic is raging throughout the Hubei Province, have the authorities closely monitored the conditions of those Hong Kong people stranded in the Hubei Province and rendered them appropriate assistance, and will the authorities expeditiously make arrangements for them to return to Hong Kong; what are the details of the authorities' work in this regard; in addition, do the authorities know what immediate measures that the Hospital Authority (HA) has put in place to ensure that adequate protective equipment is available for use by healthcare personnel so as to reduce their risks of contracting the virus, and whether HA has devised a contingency plan to deal with the situation where all items of the protective equipment have been used up?

Reply:

President,

The situation of the novel coronavirus infection is serious. It is the top priority of the Government and the Hong Kong community to step up our efforts to prevent and control the infection. We understand that members of the community are very concerned about the situation of Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei Province owing to the outbreak of the virus and the support provided to them by the Government, as well as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government's ability to provide healthcare staff with an adequate supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) as the situation unfolds.

The HKSAR Government is very concerned about the situation of Hong Kong people in Hubei Province and maintains close communication with them through the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Wuhan (WHETO). WHETO has been actively following up on their cases and liaising with relevant local authorities to provide every appropriate and practicable assistance. As at February 18, we received more than 1 300 requests for assistance from Hong Kong people in Hubei Province, involving more than 2 500 Hong Kong people scattering over 30 cities in the Province. Some of them are in remote places such as Enshi and Shiyan.

We understand that some of the Hong Kong people in Hubei Province, especially those with chronic illnesses, require medicines provided from Hong

Kong. WHETO has co-ordinated with the Department of Health (DH) and contacted the Hong Kong people in need to gather information about their medical history in Hong Kong, with a view to obtaining medicines that they need from the Hospital Authority (HA) or from private medical practitioners through their relatives and friends in Hong Kong. Given that these Hong Kong people are scattered in different locations across the Province, the medicines have to be further distributed to their respective places of residence after delivery to Wuhan. The HKSAR Government is working full steam ahead on this matter. As at February 18, arrangements have been made to deliver medicines to 120 Hong Kong people in Hubei Province.

In addition, DH has set up a health hotline to provide medical information to Hong Kong people in Hubei Province. WHETO has also provided them with contacts of medical organisations in Wuhan which offer online medical consultation services, through which those in need may seek medical advice. They may also call the emotional support hotlines operated by a non-governmental organisation for assistance.

After receiving requests for assistance, the relevant departments of the HKSAR Government have been making assessments and plans on bringing the Hong Kong people stranded in Hubei Province back to Hong Kong, including assessing in a thorough and prudent manner the risk on public health and the practicality of the operation. We have to not only avoid cross-infection among the returnees on their way back to Hong Kong, but also consider the quarantine arrangements for the returnees upon their arrival in Hong Kong. The latter includes the need to have sufficient quarantine facilities.

To minimise the risk of community-acquired infections, returnees from Hubei Province have to undergo 14-day quarantine and isolation in quarantine centres. Given that the number of Hong Kong people in Hubei Province is not small and in view of the current situation, the HKSAR Government will need to arrange their return to Hong Kong in batches. We will proceed with caution and continue to co-ordinate and follow up with the relevant Mainland authorities. We will also maintain contact with the Hong Kong people in Hubei Province and provide them with every appropriate and practicable assistance, with a view to helping them return to Hong Kong as soon as possible.

In respect of PPE of HA, with the development of the novel coronavirus infection, HA has expedited the procurement of PPE since January this year. Owing to the recent significant increase in the consumption of PPE, the stockpile of PPE in public hospitals as at February 15, which includes approximately 18 million surgical masks, 2.2 million protective gowns, 0.5 million face shields and 1.1 million N95 respirators, is only adequate for about one month's consumption. HA will use the stock prudently on a need basis to ensure that adequate PPE is available for use by healthcare staff.

Public hospitals have established guidelines on the use of PPE for medical procedures of different risk levels. Training is provided to allow frontline healthcare staff of various positions to understand and get familiar with infection control measures required for different medical procedures, including on the use of suitable PPE. Healthcare staff will put

on suitable PPE depending on the type of infectious disease that the patient has, including whether it can be transmitted by droplets, is airborne or can be transmitted by contact. Healthcare worker treating patients in high-risk areas or performing high-risk procedures will need to wear a full set of suitable PPE, including a N95 respirator. Ward facilities and arrangements for collecting patient specimens will also comply with the corresponding requirements on infection control.

At the moment, the transport and logistics supply of PPE is tight globally and there is a shortage of raw materials for manufacturing PPE. With the delivery by suppliers slowing down and shipments reducing, the stock of PPE kept by HA has been decreasing. Accordingly, public hospitals have strengthened stock control and reminded healthcare staff of the proper use of PPE. With the Government's co-ordination, some of the gears ordered earlier by HA has been delivered progressively since early February. HA will continue to endeavour to expedite the procurement of PPE so as to ensure that adequate PPE is provided to frontline healthcare staff for provision of services. Thank you, President.