

LC Urgent Q3: Enhancing measures to cope with epidemic outbreak

Following is an urgent question by the Dr Hon Kwok Ka-ki 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, there has been an outbreak of pneumonia with unknown causes in Wuhan, and some of the patients are operators in a seafood wholesale market. As the flow of residents between Wuhan and Hong Kong will increase with the approach of the Lunar New Year, there are worries that the disease will spread to Hong Kong. In this connection, will the Government take the following measures immediately: enhancing the prevention of the epidemic at the boundary control points (including the deployment of staff to board the planes and Express Rail Link trains coming from Wuhan to carry out quarantine work), stepping up the prevention of the epidemic at the local level (including the enhancement of the disinfection and cleansing work at wet markets), and devising a plan for public hospitals to cope with the epidemic outbreak amid the influenza surge?

Reply:

President,

The Government has adopted various immediate measures after an outbreak of pneumonia with unknown causes in Wuhan. These measures include strengthening port health measures.

Prevention measures at boundary control points are important elements in tackling communicable diseases. Both the Food and Health Bureau and the Department of Health attach great importance to the work on port health measures. Regarding the cluster of pneumonia cases identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, the Port Health Division has, in addition to regular measures, put in place enhanced measures at all boundary control points since January 1, 2020, with particular attention to incoming flights and Express Rail Link (XRL) trains from Wuhan. Major measures are as follows:

- (1) immediate referral of inbound travellers with relevant symptoms and travel history to public hospitals for treatment in isolation and follow-up;
- (2) advised the MTR Corporation Limited, the Airport Authority and relevant airlines to enhance the cleaning and disinfection for incoming XRL trains and flights from Wuhan. Cleaning of the XRL West Kowloon Station and the airport terminal buildings has also been stepped up;
- (3) put in place an additional infrared thermal imaging system in the Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) designated for checking the body

temperature of inbound travellers from Wuhan starting from January 3, 2020;

(4) deployed additional manpower at the XRL West Kowloon Station for checking the body temperature of inbound travellers starting from January 3, 2020. With effect from January 6, during the arrival of the two XRL trains that have stopped at Wuhan, all inbound travellers will have their body temperature checked by hand-held infrared thermometers to ensure that the body temperature of individual travellers from these two trains is monitored; and

(5) stepped up the promotion of health messages about the prevention of pneumonia and respiratory tract infection for inbound and outbound travellers at the HKIA and the XRL West Kowloon Station. Health promotion at boundary control points is also enhanced through broadcasts and pamphlets, etc. to remind inbound and outbound travellers to take heed of the preventive measures and maintain good personal and environmental hygiene. When travelling outside Hong Kong, one should avoid visiting wet markets, live poultry markets or farms. Travellers are also reminded to wear surgical masks, seek medical advice and report their travel history to their doctors when they have a fever or respiratory symptoms.

The Port Health Division will maintain close communication and collaboration with stakeholders of all boundary control points and provide timely updates on the situation and related measures.

Enhancing environmental hygiene

The Government has enhanced full cleaning of all of its venues and facilities. For example, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) will step up the cleaning schedule of their facilities with 1:99 diluted bleach. Other departments, such as the Transport Department and the Housing Department, will also step up cleaning at public transport interchanges, public transport carriers, public housing estates, etc.

The FEHD will step up the cleaning of public facilities under its management, including public markets, cooked food centres, hawker bazaars, public toilets and refuse collection points. The FEHD disseminates information to the trade associations of the food industry and reminds the operators of food premises to keep their food premises and equipment clean, as well as to maintain hygiene practices in handling food. Holders of hawker stalls are also urged to clean up their stalls.

Preparation during Influenza Season

I would like to give an account on the work of the Hospital Authority (HA) to tackle seasonal influenza during the seasonal influenza season. The Government has been encouraging the public to receive seasonal influenza vaccination as early as possible. To cope with the surge in service demand that may happen during the winter influenza season, the HA started to make preparation in July last year and allocated around \$732 million to hospital clusters in advance to facilitate the early preparation by frontline

management staff on manpower and supporting arrangement. In order to increase service capacity, the HA is opening 506 new beds in 2019-20 and has reserved resources for hospitals to open around 900 temporary beds according to operational needs during winter surge.

Regarding manpower, the HA will offer higher pay rate to locum doctors providing services at Accident and Emergency (A&E) sessions and General Outpatient Clinic (GOPC) sessions during winter surge. The locum recruitment has also been extended to Radiographers, Physiotherapists, Optometrists and Medical Laboratory Technologists since December 2019. Besides, the HA has enhanced the arrangement of Special Honorarium Scheme of winter surge by phases to strengthen its manpower.

In addition to the existing 13 GOPCs providing services on public holidays, four GOPCs will also provide services on particular days during long holidays, covering 17 districts in Hong Kong.

In addition, in response to the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, the HA activated Serious Response Level on January 4, 2020, and subsequently held a Central Command Committee meeting, chaired by Chief Executive of the HA, to review the response measures and allocation of resources in each hospital cluster with seven Cluster Chief Executives of the HA, such as monitoring the supply of personal protective equipment, deploying manpower in a timely manner, and reviewing non-emergency service arrangement. The Cluster Chief Executives will closely monitor the service situation of each public hospital and implement a series of enhanced surveillance and infection control measures in public hospitals and clinics. Public hospitals have completed the widest opening of the fresh air dampers in the air handling equipment in the waiting areas of the A&E departments to achieve higher fresh air rate, and have completed wheeling in mobile High Efficiency Particulate Air filter units to augment the total air change rates in A&E waiting areas. Laboratory testing services have also been enhanced with a view to obtaining testing results as soon as possible for arrangement of suitable treatment for patients. More stringent infection control measures, including restrictions on visiting arrangement, are enforced in public hospitals. Visitors to public hospitals and clinics are required to put on surgical masks and perform hand hygiene before and after visiting patient. As regards personal protective equipment, such as surgical masks and N95 masks, the current stockpile is adequate for at least three months' consumption. Meanwhile, the HA will maintain close liaison with the suppliers to ensure sustainable supply of protective equipment. The HA will closely monitor the utilisation of isolation beds in the seven clusters and arrange bed deployment in a timely manner.