

LC Urgent Q3: Immediate measures to prevent measles epidemic from spreading

Following is an urgent question by the Dr Hon Priscilla Leung 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 (March 27):

Question:

There is a recent outbreak of measles epidemic in Hong Kong. It has been reported that this year up to the present, 26 confirmed cases of measles infection have been recorded and the infected persons in nine of those cases are personnel working at the airport and for airline companies. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the immediate measures adopted by the Government to increase the supply of measles vaccines, so as to provide measles vaccination for all persons having a higher risk of contracting the disease (including the personnel working at the airport and for airline companies, as well as healthcare workers); and

(2) whether it will immediately request airline companies to regularly notify the Centre for Health Protection of the cases of their staff members contracting measles, so as to minimise the risk of the epidemic spreading?

Reply:

President,

In my previous replies to the questions raised by the Dr Hon Elizabeth Quat and the Dr Hon Helena Wong, I have illustrated the immediate measures taken by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) to cope with the cases of measles infection at the Hong Kong International Airport, and the arrangements of measles vaccination and the latest supply of measles vaccines in Hong Kong. I will now supplement the latest developments.

(1) Since a confirmed infection case emerged at the airport on March 22, the CHP has attached great importance to the infection control measures at the airport, particularly the measles vaccination for people working at the airport who are non-immune to measles. The CHP has all along been maintaining close liaison with the Airport Authority in order to improve the operation and arrangements of the measles vaccination stations at the airport to facilitate those who need to receive vaccination.

Since last Friday, the CHP has provided measles vaccination to over 1 650 people working at the airport. Starting from March 26, the CHP has deployed extra manpower and provided an additional time slot. It is expected that the daily service capacity would increase from 700 to 1 300

vaccinations. Besides, the private clinic at the airport will also provide vaccination to staff working at the airport shortly. The CHP will closely monitor and review the situation of measles vaccination for people working at the airport. The CHP will also continue to closely liaise with the Airport Authority to explore ways to further enhance the vaccination arrangements.

Besides, in view of the recent surge in measles cases, the Central Committee on Infectious Disease and Emergency Responses of the Hospital Authority (HA) convened early this week an ad hoc meeting, which was joined by representatives from the CHP, to discuss the risk assessment and preparedness of public hospitals. The meeting agreed that measures need to be implemented for early diagnosis and isolation of possible measles cases and to provide vaccinations to staff in need, including those who have never been vaccinated or those with inadequate immunity, to reduce the risk of nosocomial infections. Earlier the HA issued notifications, as well as updated information on measles, to remind frontline healthcare staff to be vigilant towards patients with symptoms of measles. Suspected cases will need to be reported and treated under isolation, with specimens sent to the CHP for testing.

Measles vaccination programme of the healthcare staff of the HA will commence next week. Vaccinations will be provided to staff working in high risk departments, such as paediatric, obstetrics and gynaecology, haematology, clinical oncology, intensive care units and isolation wards in the first phase.

The DH will maintain close liaison with two vaccines suppliers to strive for a steady supply to the children under the routine Hong Kong Childhood Immunisation Programme, people working at the airport, healthcare staff at the HA who have higher priority for measles vaccination.

(2) In view of the recent cases of measles infection at the Hong Kong International Airport, the CHP has immediately liaised with relevant airline company and confirmed that it has the established guidelines which stipulate sick staff should not go to work. The CHP has requested the relevant airline company to reinforce the education of relevant guidelines among staff to protect public health. According to the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap 599), measles is one of the 50 statutorily notifiable infectious diseases in Hong Kong. All registered medical practitioners are required to notify the CHP of all suspected or confirmed cases of these diseases for the purpose of disease control.

Lastly, I wish to appeal here that members of the public who are planning to travel to places with high incidence or outbreaks of measles should review their vaccination history and past medical history, especially people born outside Hong Kong who might not have received measles vaccination during childhood. Those who have not received two doses of measles-containing vaccines, with unknown vaccination history or with unknown immunity against measles are urged to consult their doctor for advice on vaccination at least two weeks before departure. Pregnant women and women preparing for pregnancy who are not immune to measles as well as children aged below one who are not due for the first dose of the Measles, Mumps and Rubella combined vaccine

under the Hong Kong Childhood Immunisation Programme are advised not to travel to places with outbreaks of measles.

The incubation period of measles ranges from seven days to up to 21 days. Contacts who are not immune to measles may develop relevant symptoms, such as fever, skin rash, cough, runny nose and red eyes, in the incubation period. They should observe if they develop such symptoms in the period. If symptoms arise, they should wear surgical masks, stop going to work or school and avoid going to crowded places. They should avoid contact with non-immune persons, especially persons with weakened immunity, pregnant women and children aged below one. They should also report their symptoms and prior travel history to the healthcare staff so that appropriate infection control measures can be implemented at the healthcare facilities to prevent any potential spread.