

LCQ1: Anti-epidemic measures

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (December 16):

Question:

With a new wave of outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic coming inexorably last month, the numbers of confirmed patients and cases with unknown sources of infection have both surged sharply to record highs. Regarding the anti-epidemic measures, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as there are views that mandatory universal testing helps identify most of the asymptomatic infected persons and cut the transmission chain, thereby ameliorating the epidemic, under what circumstances that the Government will consider implementing mandatory universal testing;

(2) given that at present, quite a number of members of the public have been infected allegedly due to attending private meal gatherings or parties, whether the Government will enact legislation to extend to private premises the stipulations concerning the prohibition on group gathering and the infection control measures for the catering industry; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether it will follow the health code system implemented in Mainland cities by restricting those who are unable to produce a digital health code for verifying their health conditions from entering certain types of premises or taking public transport; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Innovation and Technology Bureau, my consolidated reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan is as follows:

The World Health Organization (WHO) and health experts around the globe have pointed out that COVID-19 will not vanish without an effective treatment method and vaccine. In fact, even if we start vaccination next year, the vaccine will not be able to completely prevent the spread of the virus in a short period of time. Therefore, targeted and strategic virus testing is still an important element of anti-epidemic efforts.

The Hong Kong SAR must stand in solidarity to fight against COVID-19 and anti-epidemic efforts must be all-rounded. In accordance with the principle

of "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of virus in the community", we must incorporate disease prevention and control and infection management into the day-to-day operations of society. With regards to preventing the importation of cases, we have implemented a series of enhanced measures for border control, including the implementation of designated quarantine hotels and transport, strengthening the testing arrangements for inbound travellers, as well as overall tightening of management of persons exempted from compulsory quarantine. To prevent the spreading of the virus in the community, we have been upholding the principle of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment", implementing anti-epidemic measures such as virus testing, contact tracing and social distancing, with a view to preventing the spread of the virus in the community.

Regarding the strategy for virus testing, as pointed out by the WHO, testing should be targeted, and in particular be provided for targeted groups with outbreaks. As such, specified persons of high risk are required to undergo compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted groups are arranged to undergo testing on an obligatory basis, and we also encourage members of the public to undergo testing on a voluntary basis. To tie in with the above strategy, the Government has been stepping up surveillance and testing efforts in a multi-pronged approach, and the current maximum daily testing capacity of public and private laboratories has been substantially increased to approximately 100 000 tests per day (without sample pooling). Through various channels of specimen collection, it is estimated that samples can be collected from a maximum of 80 000 members of the public for testing each day.

In the past month (i.e. November 15 to yesterday), the Government conducted a total of 940 000 virus tests on a mandatory basis, an obligatory basis and a voluntary basis. For testing on a mandatory basis, from November 21 (upon commencement of compulsory testing for specified premises) to December 13, more than 75 600 persons received free compulsory testing at community testing centres (CTCs), of which 143 samples tested preliminarily positive (0.19 per cent), demonstrating the effectiveness of compulsory testing. On the other hand, from November 28 (upon commencement of compulsory testing for symptomatic persons) to December 9, more than 18 700 symptomatic persons were issued a written direction to undergo compulsory testing by private medical practitioners, of which more than 90 positive cases were recorded (0.50 per cent). In view of recent small-scale outbreaks in some estates or buildings or public health considerations, the Government has issued compulsory testing notices and set up mobile specimen collection stations on site to facilitate testing by residents on a need basis. For testing on an obligatory basis, a daily average of over 5 000 tests were carried out under testing for targeted groups in the past month, with the positive rate being 0.01 per cent. For testing on a voluntary basis, from November 15 (upon service commencement of CTCs) to December 13, more than 140 000 persons were provided self-paid testing service at CTCs, of which 309 samples tested preliminarily positive (0.22 per cent). We also arrange to provide free testing services through mobile specimen collection stations and specimen bottle distribution point in districts with a number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, with a view to facilitating and encouraging residents of the

districts or individuals who perceive themselves as having a higher risk of exposure to undergo testing. From November 23 to December 13, the Government had set up a total of 13 mobile specimen collection stations or specimen bottle distribution point, which provided testing service for a total of about 91 200 persons, of which 104 samples tested preliminarily positive (0.11 per cent).

All in all, the Government implements a risk-based and precision-guided testing strategy through testing measures in the three above aspects, with a view to cutting the transmission chains as soon as possible.

On whether "population-wide mandatory testing" should be conducted, it is not an effective anti-epidemic measure and it is also not feasible under the current situation in Hong Kong to conduct population-wide mandatory testing, the implementation of which would necessitate comprehensive lockdown, which would however cause disruptions to the normal operation of Hong Kong and the daily lives of citizens. We are of the view that the present precision-guided anti-epidemic measures which focus primarily on mandatory testing for people of high-risk groups, complemented by broadened and more convenient voluntary testing for the public, constitute a more appropriate strategy.

The epidemic situation in Hong Kong has deteriorated in recent days. The number of newly confirmed cases stands high every day, including a considerable number of cases with unknown source and involving different clusters. The situation is worrying. Having regard to the relevant development, the Government has put in place very stringent social distancing measures. The relevant measures are in align with or even more stringent than those implemented during the peak of the third wave epidemic in July and August this year. However, in the past weeks, there were still a lot of people on the streets and social gatherings. We wish to stress that, same as other anti-epidemic work related to public health, solely relying on the Government to put in place restrictions and requirements through legislation is insufficient for achieving the effect of quickly suppressing the epidemic. We appeal to the general public to co-operate and be self-disciplined, and to temporarily hold off social activities at this crucial time. If the number of people on the streets does not show signs of significant decrease within a short period of time, we do not rule out the need to introduce new legislation to further regulate social activities and gatherings for protecting public health.

In addition, to encourage the public to keep a more precise record of their whereabouts, and to tap technology to combat the pandemic, the Government launched the "LeaveHomeSafe" exposure notification mobile app on November 16. It aims to provide a convenient digital tool for members of the public to record travel records under the new normal, thereby increasing the vigilance and self-protection awareness of the public. At the same time, the Government announced on November 24 that all persons responsible for carrying on catering businesses providing dine-in services and scheduled premises must apply for a "LeaveHomeSafe" venue QR code from the Government under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and

Premises) Regulation (Cap. 599F).

President, a multi-pronged and science-based approach is instrumental to fighting against COVID-19 successfully. Universal compulsory testing, without pairing with a comprehensive lockdown and with members of the public continuing to be engaged in various social activities, is not an effective anti-epidemic measure and cannot eradicate the virus. The Government has also consulted the four experts who unanimously disagreed with introducing universal compulsory testing in Hong Kong. There is no silver bullet for fighting against the epidemic. Thorough implementation of multi-pronged measures to achieve "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of virus in the community" is the key to effective epidemic control.

Thank you, President.