

LCQ10: Conducting body temperature checks for incoming travellers

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hok-fung and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (June 12):

Question:

It is learnt that since the SARS outbreak in 2003, the Department of Health (DH) has been conducting temperature checks for people arriving in Hong Kong; in the case of travellers entering Hong Kong through land boundary control points (BCPs) in private vehicles, DH has arranged for its staff to conduct body temperature checks for the drivers and passengers on board in an instant by using contactless thermometers. However, some members of the public have relayed to me their doubts about the effectiveness of such practice. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) given that the aforesaid measure has been introduced for over 20 years, whether the Government has assessed if (i) the measure has achieved the original intention of the relevant policy, and (ii) the practice of arranging for dedicated staff to check the body temperature of drivers and passengers of private vehicles is economically efficient;
- (2) of the respective numbers of travellers crossing the boundary on foot and in vehicles whose body temperature was detected to be abnormal during temperature screening in each of the past five years, and the Government's procedures for handling such cases, e.g. whether it had denied entry of the travellers concerned; if so, of the number of travellers who had been denied entry and sent to the hospital immediately; and
- (3) of the manpower and resources deployed by the Government for conducting on-the-spot temperature checks at land BCPs in each of the past five years, together with the costs of the mobile temperature-checking devices involved?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Department of Health (DH), our reply to the question raised by the Hon Chan Hok-fung is as follows:

- (1) In accordance with the power conferred by the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance and with regard to the guidelines of the International Health Regulations, the DH of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government enforces various preventive measures at boundary control points (BCPs) to prevent the introduction or spreading out of infectious diseases into or from Hong Kong. Since 2003, trained health screening staff have been conducting body temperature screening for all arrivals (including travellers and drivers in cars) at all BCPs. According to the mechanism, the

staff would perform further health assessments for travellers with confirmed fever or in need (such as travellers who self-reported being unwell) to understand their symptoms, travel history, contact history, etc, so as to make appropriate referrals and follow-up, including compulsory referral of travellers with suspected infection of certain statutory notifiable infectious diseases to Hong Kong public hospitals.

The HKSAR Government has been maintaining close co-operation with entry-exit health inspection and quarantine authorities of the Mainland to safeguard the well-being and safety of residents and visitors of the two places. The Health Bureau and the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (GACC) signed the Co-operation Arrangement for Entry-exit Health Inspection and Quarantine between the GACC and the Health Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (Co-operation Arrangement) in 2023. Under the normalisation arrangements for epidemic prevention and control, the two parties agreed to focus on the health inspection and quarantine of their respective inbound personnel traveling between the HKSAR and the Mainland BCPs.

The HKSAR Government will maintain close liaison with the relevant Mainland authorities and actively review the entry health inspection and quarantine arrangements (including temperature screening) from the public health perspective, taking into account factors such as cost-effectiveness and appropriateness.

(2) The numbers of inbound travellers with fever confirmed during temperature screening at land BCPs and mandatory referrals to public hospitals since 2019 are as follows:

	2019	2020*	2021*	2022*	2023*	2024^
Total number of inbound travellers with fever	5 961	243	28	15	3 799	1 713
Number of inbound travellers with fever on the private car lanes#	12	0	0	0	0	1
Number of inbound travellers who met specific criteria of statutory notifiable infectious diseases and were compulsorily referred to Hong Kong hospitals	2	16	28	15	0	0

In general, the number of inbound travellers entering via private car lanes is much lower than the number of travellers using the arrival hall.

* During the COVID-19 epidemic (especially from 2020 to 2022), the number of inbound and outbound travellers dropped significantly, and only two land BCPs remained open for private car passenger clearance services most of the time.

^ As of May 31.

(3) The DH deploys appropriate manpower to carry out health screening work based on the design of each BCP and its passenger and vehicle flow. There are

currently 10 land BCPs in Hong Kong. Regarding vehicle lanes, according to the operation mode of the BCPs, the DH will deploy a health screening staff at each inbound vehicle lane to perform temperature screening. From 2019 to 2023, the numbers of health screening posts of the DH at land BCPs are as follows:

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Average daily number of health screening posts in total	510	554	555	427	443
Average daily number of health screening posts at inbound private car lanes	83	83	83	83	124

Depending on the vehicle flow, the average number of inbound private car lanes opened at each BCP ranges from two to 32. Currently, the average number of health screening posts at inbound private car lanes per day is about 120, which is higher than that before the COVID-19 epidemic mainly due to the full commissioning of the Heung Yuen Wai BCP in 2022-23 and the increasing vehicle flow of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge. Besides, during the COVID-19 epidemic, the DH deployed relevant personnel to assist in implementing various rigorous measures to prevent imported cases, such as inbound health declaration, compulsory quarantine, etc.

In recent years, the DH has engaged outsourced service contractors to provide health screening services at most land BCPs. The health screening work at the remaining BCPs is handled by the contract staff of the DH. The total relevant expenditure of the DH from 2019 to 2023 was approximately \$1.28 billion. As the service scope of the health screening contract signed between the DH and the contractors covers all related work at BCPs (including temperature screening, health assessment, providing medical assistance to travellers in need, and health education), the DH cannot provide a breakdown of figures of the resources involved in conducting temperature screening at land BCPs.