

LCQ10: Measures to counter epidemics

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (June 17):

Question:

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic early this year, more than 1 000 members of the public have been confirmed to be infected and various trades have also been hard hit. Some members of the public have pointed out that the Government's measures to counter the epidemic have much room for improvement. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the details of the current liaison mechanism between the Hong Kong Government and the health authorities of the Guangdong Province and Macao, the National Health Commission, as well as overseas health authorities;
- (2) whether the offices of Hong Kong Government on the Mainland and in various overseas places regularly submit reports on the local health and social conditions, etc. to the Government; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) whether it has any plan to update, when the epidemic is over, the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance, including the definition of response levels, the command structures, the factors to be considered in risk assessment, and the public health actions to be taken at different response levels; if not, of the reasons for that;
- (4) of the respective existing staffing establishments of the seven branches under the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health; whether it will conduct a review, when the epidemic is over, on the effectiveness of the CHP's efforts in countering the epidemic and examine, in the light of the review outcome, the organisation structure of the CHP; if not, of the reasons for that;
- (5) what measures are in place to ensure that the various types of anti-epidemic items and facilities (e.g. surgical masks, personal protective equipment for healthcare personnel and quarantine facilities) are in adequate supply in case of further outbreak of epidemics, and whether it will set a target level for the supply and stockpile of such items; if so, of the details; and
- (6) whether it will consider drawing up a list of essential anti-epidemic items (including but not limited to surgical masks, personal protective equipment for healthcare personnel and disinfectants) in accordance with the Reserved Commodities Ordinance (Cap. 296), and imposing control on the

storage, distribution and maximum prices of such items within a specific period of time, so as to avoid exacerbation of the shortage of such items during the outbreak of epidemics because of panic hoarding of such items by members of the public; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Commerce and Economic Development Bureau, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau, the Security Bureau and the Hospital Authority (HA), I provide the following reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Tony Tse:

(1) The Food and Health Bureau, the then-Ministry of Health of the Central People's Government and the Secretariat for Social Affairs and Culture (SSAC) of the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region (Macao SAR Government) signed the Co-operation Agreement on Response Mechanism for Public Health Emergencies (the Agreement) in 2005. The Agreement was updated with the National Health Commission (NHC) and SSAC in 2018. The Department of Health (DH) also signed the Agreement of Co-operation on Emergency Public Health Incidents in Hong Kong, Guangdong and Macao with the then-Department of Health of Guangdong Province and the Health Bureau of the Macao SAR Government in 2006.

According to the mechanism under the relevant agreements, the three governments have worked closely in areas such as public health emergencies, surveillance and alert for infectious diseases, emergency response, technical issues, training and scientific research, so as to enhance the joint capabilities in disease prevention and control. The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the DH has also maintained close liaison and cooperation with the NHC, Health Commission of Guangdong Province and the Macao SAR Government according to the abovementioned mechanism to exchange information and surveillance data on outbreaks of infectious diseases and notify cross-boundary cases for follow-up investigation, with a view to raising the prevention and control standards and capabilities of the three places in responding to infectious diseases.

The CHP has also maintained close communication with the World Health Organization as well as the health authorities of other countries and regions to keep abreast of the latest information on the outbreak globally and report on the situation of confirmed cases in Hong Kong.

(2) In view of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, the overseas Economic and Trade Offices (ETOs) of the Government have been actively disseminating latest information to various sectors through different channels, including emails, social media, explaining to them the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government's anti-epidemic measures. The ETOs also actively seek updates on the response measures undertaken by the local governments in response to the development of the outbreak, such as

quarantine measures, immigration controls, economic support measures. They also maintain continuous assessment of the local situation and its impact on Hong Kong residents there, and keep close liaison with various bureaux and departments and report to them on the latest situation.

Furthermore, the Mainland Offices of the Government have closely monitored the development of the epidemic situation as well as major policies and measures in their service areas, and made timely reports to the relevant bureaux and departments to facilitate assessment of their implications on Hong Kong. At the same time, they have also uploaded on their websites and official WeChat accounts relevant health information and the latest information on anti-epidemic measures in Hong Kong to enable Hong Kong residents in the Mainland to more easily access the relevant information.

(3) The Government announced the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance (the Plan) on January 4, 2020. The Plan sets out the Government's preparedness and response plan in case of the outbreak of a Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance and adopts a three-tier response level, namely Alert, Serious and Emergency. The Government will assess the risk from time to time taking into account the development of the COVID-19 outbreak situation and the latest scientific evidence, and suitably adjust the relevant preparedness and response plan as necessary.

(4) The establishments of the seven branches under the CHP as at June 1, 2020 were tabulated below:

Branch	Establishment
Communicable Disease Branch	275
Emergency Response and Programme Management Branch	184
Health Promotion Branch	88
Infection Control Branch	17
Non-communicable Disease Branch	100
Public Health Laboratory Services Branch	386
Public Health Services Branch	705
Total	1 755

The DH reviews the manpower requirements from time to time and makes redeployment as appropriate. If needed, the DH will seek additional resources in accordance with the established mechanism.

(5) and (6) Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Government Logistics Department (GLD) has adopted a multi-pronged approach to procure anti-epidemic items through various channels and means, with a view to securing the supplies as quickly as possible to meet the Government's operational needs. The Government has earmarked \$1 billion under the Anti-epidemic Fund (AEF) to ensure sufficient provision for speedy procurement of personal

protective equipment (PPE) in the highly competitive market.

With reference to experts' advice and having considered the stockpile level, the Government has set priorities for the use of anti-epidemic items. For anti-epidemic items currently procured by the GLD, priority is accorded to meeting the needs of frontline staff engaged in quarantine-related duties, including healthcare and port health staff of the DH and frontline staff enforcing quarantine orders and maintaining essential public services. The DH has also maintained close liaison with the GLD, and has increased and sped up procurement for stock replenishment so as to ensure a sufficient supply of protective equipment.

With regards to the development of the outbreak, the HA increased the stockpiling target of PPE from three months to six months in January 2020 and has expedited the procurement of PPE in large quantities. It proceeded with global procurement in late January, including making procurement flexibly using the approach of direct procurement. Public hospitals have also strengthened measures for stock control and at the same time encouraged effective use of PPE in order to ensure that staff members receive sufficient protection. The HA will closely monitor the situation and continue to procure PPE to meet the demands as a result of the outbreak.

For local mask production, the Correctional Services Department has further increased its production. The Government has also set up a Local Mask Production Subsidy Scheme under the AEF, and the quotas of 20 production lines under the Scheme have been fully allocated. These locally produced masks will help ensure an adequate supply to meet the Government's demand for masks.

As the supply of masks continues to be tight in the short run, the Government considers that it is more pragmatic and practicable to strive to increase the supply and manage the demand. The Government currently does not have any plans to mandatorily control the supply and prices of masks through legislation, because this could be counterproductive and possibly adversely affect supply, or lower our ability to procure masks from other places. To address the problem at source, we will continue to increase supply and appeal for donation of masks to those in need through various channels in order to meet the different needs of society and address the problem of supply.

For quarantine and isolation facilities, the Government has been looking for suitable sites for quarantine facilities in full steam since late January 2020, and has increased the capacity of quarantine facilities through different means, such as hiring existing facilities, constructing additional units. Currently, the four quarantine centres under the Government provide over 3 700 units in total. The relevant facilities have been adequate for meeting the quarantine requirements in the past few months. If needed, alteration work can be carried out in some of the facilities to provide additional units.

Furthermore, the HA has also been closely monitoring the usage of isolation beds in public hospitals for timely redeployment of resources, and

has retrofitted one to two general wards in each cluster into standard negative pressure wards to provide around 400 additional standard negative pressure beds as second-tier isolation wards for use by patients who have recovered but not yet showing negative results in their virus tests. The HA will make redeployment accordingly having regard to the operational and clinical needs of hospitals, and will continue to closely monitor the situation and explore different options for isolation facilities in view of the development of the outbreak.