

LCQ12: Long-term measures to tackle epidemics

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Chun-ying and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 22):

Question:

By now, Coronavirus Disease 2019 has broken out in more than 110 countries/regions around the world, with the cumulative number of confirmed cases exceeding 100 000. There are comments that in an era of globalisation, with contacts among people of different places becoming increasingly frequent, and problems relating to health, the environment, biochemical safety, cross-species transmission of viruses, etc. becoming more and more changeable and unpredictable, the Government should formulate long-term measures to tackle epidemics. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will draw up a contingency plan under which, in the event of a large-scale outbreak of an infectious disease in Hong Kong, government officers in each policy bureau may be split up to continue working at different locations, so as to reduce the risk of mass infection; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) given that the Government has set up a certain number of temporary quarantine centres in tackling the current epidemic, but the sites selected for some of these centres have been queried by the residents nearby as being too close to residential areas, whether the Government will identify locations far away from residential areas (e.g. outlying islands) for setting up permanent quarantine centres; if so, of the timetable; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as it has been reported that places such as Mainland China, South Korea, Taiwan and France have criminalised acts of spreading rumours, and given that earlier on Hong Kong has seen cases of people scrambling for food and daily necessities which were caused by rumours, what measures the Government will take to curb the spread of various kinds of rumours amid an epidemic outbreak?

Reply:

President,

The coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) is still severe in some overseas countries and regions. To safeguard the health of the public and protect Hong Kong's healthcare system, currently the focus of the Government's prevention and control work is to prevent the virus from being imported into

Hong Kong from other places and to slow down the spreading of cases in the community. In this regard, the Government has put in place and will continue to implement a series of stringent border control and social distancing measures. The Government will review the feasibility of the relevant measures from time to time and make timely adjustments, having regard to the latest situation of the outbreak.

In consultation with the Civil Service Bureau and Security Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan Chun-ying is as follows:

(1) The Government attaches great importance to the occupational safety and health (OSH) of its employees. Having regard to their specific operational needs and circumstances as well as OSH risks, bureaux/departments would formulate effective safety management systems and measures. For example, in the event of an infectious disease outbreak, the Government would implement targeted infection control measures to reduce social contact, the risk of infection and spread of the virus so as to protect the staff. These measures include, where possible, introducing flexible working hours to reduce staff using public transport during peak hours; adopting a roster system to reduce the number of staff working in an office at any one time; adjusting the frequency, duration and mode of meetings; arranging staff to work at different office premises, etc.

(2) In the long run, we believe there is a need to set up in Hong Kong permanent quarantine facilities to cope with outbreaks that may occur in the future. After the COVID-19 outbreak has subsided, we will assess the situation in a holistic manner and consider Hong Kong's long-term quarantine needs for making preparations.

(3) Hong Kong residents enjoy the freedom of speech and communication, but these freedoms are not absolute. While there is currently no specified criminal offence in Hong Kong targeting the deliberate dissemination of false information, the Internet is not an unreal virtual world without any legislative regulation. Should any speech made involves illegal acts, regardless of whether such acts occur on the Internet or not, as long as they involve criminal offences, they would be regulated by the relevant legislation.

However, as messages can be disseminated rapidly on the Internet, especially via the social media and communications software, unique challenges are presented to the law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, the proposal to introduce specific legislation targeting deliberate dissemination of rumours would involve many complicated and controversial issues, such as protection of human rights; how to define certain speech as rumours; how to define a rumour's impact on society and ascertain its degree of impact; how to prove that the person who made the relevant speech did so deliberately with the intent to disrupt public order with false information; and whether the introduction of a specified criminal offence would be the most effective measure for tackling the issue, etc. These questions must be considered and thoroughly discussed by the community.

In response to the malicious act of spreading rumours during the fight against the outbreak leading to panic buying of goods such as rice and toilet paper in the market, the Government timely issued a press release to clarify and condemn the rumour mongers. The current outbreak prevention and control measures implemented by the Government do not target freight services. The Government has made clarifications and shared information about food and goods supply on numerous occasions through government websites as well as other media channels, and have reminded members of the public not to easily believe in the rumours. The Government has also been maintaining close liaison with suppliers and the trade and encouraged them to come forth to explain the supply situation so as to dispel the public's worries. In fighting the virus, the Government appeals to members of the public to stand united, pay close attention to information released by the Government, be vigilant against rumours and not to easily believe in them.