

LCQ14: Vaccine-related issues

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Lo Wai-kwok and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (September 15):

Question:

As at the sixth of this month, the number of people in Hong Kong who had received at least one dose of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccines (the vaccines) accounted for around 63 per cent of the eligible population, and such a percentage was some distance away from the interim goal set by the Government (i.e. a vaccination rate reaching 70 per cent by the end of this month). Moreover, it has been reported that the governments of the United States and some European countries have mandated specified personnel to receive vaccination, and quite a number of multinational enterprises have required their employees to get vaccinated before they may return to their positions. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has updated the target vaccination rate according to the global trend of the epidemic, and studied the implementation of further measures to encourage and facilitate members of the public to receive vaccination; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will consider offering free COVID-19 antibody tests to members of the public who have completed a vaccination course, so as to bolster their confidence in the efficacy of the vaccines; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) when the two scientific committees under the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health will make a decision on whether members of the public who have completed a vaccination course need to receive a third dose of the vaccines, and (if the decision is that there is such a need) whether they will announce the relevant details as soon as possible after the decision is made, including the commencement date of vaccination and whether the third dose of the vaccines may be of a different type from that of the previous two doses; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) whether it will step up publicity work relating to vaccination and organise teams of experts to explain doubts and dispel suspicions about vaccination, with a view to building a consensus among the various sectors of society on mandatory vaccination, thereby speeding up the pace of universal vaccination; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

As all along stressed by global and local experts, vaccination against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is the best measure and hope for Hong Kong and the world to ride out the epidemic. The Comirnaty and CoronaVac vaccines provided in Hong Kong are highly effective in preventing severe cases and deaths from COVID-19. People who are vaccinated are effectively protected from serious complications and even deaths after infection. Except for those having contraindications, COVID-19 vaccines are suitable for vaccination by most people.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon Lo Wai-kwok is as follows:

(1) and (4) The rapid spread of the Delta variant and other mutant strains across the world has posed enormous challenges to the work relating to infection prevention and control. There is growing evidence showing that mutant strains are more transmissible and vaccination may not be able to provide full protection against mutant strain infection and halt community transmission. Nevertheless, vaccination is still the best measure to guard against the disease as it can effectively prevent vaccinated persons from getting seriously ill or even death after infection. The World Health Organization has also pointed out that in most cases, those who are vaccinated have milder symptoms after infection and their risk of getting seriously ill or death is generally lower. Such effective infection control can safeguard our healthcare system from being overwhelmed when an outbreak occurs in the community.

As at September 13, a total of about 8.19 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered to members of the public, of whom about 4.35 million people have received the first dose of vaccine, accounting for about 64.6 per cent of the eligible population. The quantity of vaccines we have procured is sufficient to cater for the whole population of Hong Kong. The Government will sustain its efforts to take forward the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme to boost the vaccination rate, aiming at reaching the milestone of 70 per cent of the eligible population receiving at least one dose of vaccine as soon as possible. To encourage and facilitate vaccination, we will extend the operation of 21 Community Vaccination Centres (CVC) to the end of this year, and also enhance outreach vaccination services.

Nevertheless, the vaccination rate of elderly persons is persistently low with a slow growth rate, which has become the weakest link in Hong Kong's current anti-epidemic efforts. The Government strongly urges elderly persons and other high-risk individuals to get vaccinated immediately. Hundreds of millions of elderly and high-risk individuals around the world have received COVID-19 vaccination. Various research data also confirm that for the elderly and high-risk individuals, the risk of death or severe complications brought by COVID-19 infection is much higher than the side effects brought by receiving vaccination, especially when the overall local vaccination rate is at a high level and those who have been vaccinated can be infected asymptotically and spread to third parties. Overseas experience also show that mutant strains can spread at a high speed among those unvaccinated. In view of Hong Kong's crowded living environment and frequent interaction with

one another in our daily lives, even if the elderly stay at home as much as possible, it is still not possible for them to be completely isolated from outside contact. Therefore, the elderly and other high-risk individuals should get vaccinated as soon as possible for better self-protection. Otherwise, if the fifth wave of epidemic unfortunately strikes Hong Kong, the elderly and other high-risk individuals will bear the brunt and will not be able to get vaccinated in time, which may lead to large-scale outbreaks and a large number of critical or even death cases.

Focusing on vaccination for the elderly, we have implemented various measures to encourage and facilitate their vaccination. For instance, health talks are held at shopping centres, housing estates and districts, with healthcare personnel to answer enquiries from the elderly and their families and provide vaccination services on-site. In addition, the Hospital Authority (HA) plans to soon issue "referral letters" to patients with follow-up appointments at specialist or general out-patient clinics for them to get vaccinated at CVCs. We are also discussing with the HA to arrange for individual public hospitals to set up vaccination stations, such that elderly persons who visit specialist out-patient clinics for follow-up, upon receiving advice from doctors that they are suitable for vaccination, can get vaccinated immediately. As for the same-day ticket arrangement, in addition to issuing same-day tickets for vaccination to elderly persons aged 60 or above at some CVCs, starting from September 9, the arrangement has been extended to five target groups to further raise their vaccination rates. These target groups are staff of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHE), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHD) and nursing homes; staff of medical organisations; staff of schools, school bus drivers and escorts (commonly known as "nannies"); staff of catering businesses, bars or pubs; and construction site personnel.

Meanwhile, the Government and different sectors in the community have rolled out various measures to proactively encourage members of the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible. These measures include implementing vaccination leave arrangements for government employees and appealing to organisations and enterprises to adopt the same; further relaxing social distancing measures and shortening the quarantine period for fully vaccinated persons arriving at Hong Kong on the basis of "vaccine bubble"; and different sectors launching lucky draws, concessions and vaccination reward programmes. Furthermore, Government employees, as well as staff of the HA, RCHEs, RCHDs, secondary schools, primary schools, nurseries, kindergartens and special schools are required to receive vaccination. With effect from September 1, those who have not received their first dose of vaccine are required to undergo regular nucleic acid tests at their own expense (except for those who are unfit to receive vaccination because of medical conditions supported by a medical certificate).

On the other hand, the Government has followed the principles of openness, transparency, accuracy and timeliness, and adopted a science-based approach to provide the public with the latest information on COVID-19 vaccines and views of experts through different channels, so as to build social momentum and enhance citizens' willingness to get vaccinated. On

publicity and education, the Department of Health (DH) has produced a large amount of promotional materials to call on members of the public to get vaccinated and carried out related publicity work through various media. Having regard that science-based evidence is particularly important, the DH invited family doctors to informative programmes to give advice on the suitability of different cases for vaccination. For example, in collaboration with the HA and Radio Television Hong Kong, the DH explained to the public for several weeks through the programme "Vaccine Line" whether different illnesses would affect the effectiveness and safety of COVID-19 vaccination. The programme also answered public enquiries so that members of the public would have more confidence in getting vaccinated. We have also launched a thematic website to provide such information as the mechanisms of vaccines, their protection and need-to-know facts. A dashboard is provided on the website to give updated information on vaccine doses administered in Hong Kong.

(2) The efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines has been well proven by large-scale clinical tests and massive vaccination carried out in different countries. Conducting extensive antibody tests for vaccinated persons under the universal vaccination programme is unnecessary and a waste of resources. The Joint Scientific Committees and the Expert Advisory Panel (JSC-EAP) do not advise the public to check their antibody level after vaccination under normal circumstances as a negative result or low antibody level may not correlate with lack of protection by the vaccines. The Government currently has no plan to provide free antibody testing for the public. Nevertheless, it is providing funding for medical schools of universities to conduct evidence-based scientific research on antibody levels after vaccination to facilitate formulating future vaccination strategies.

(3) The JSC-EAP convened a meeting in late July to discuss recommendations on COVID-19 vaccination, including the need for a third dose of COVID-19 vaccine for fully vaccinated persons. The JSC-EAP considered that it is still premature to decide if and when a third dose is necessary for the general population, and recommended to continue monitoring new scientific evidence that becomes available.

With many countries preparing or making arrangements for target groups (such as healthcare personnel and persons with low immunity) to receive a third dose of vaccine, there will be growing data in this regard. We will keep in view of the situation and maintain close liaison with pharmaceutical companies. When there is sufficient data and scientific evidence for discussion and assessment, we will seek professional advice from the JSC-EAP in due course.