

LCQ16: Coping with fifth wave of epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Kennedy Wong and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 26):

Question:

Earlier on, some aircrew members brought the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) into the community causing community transmission, and recently there are also cases with unknown sources of infection. Some experts have pointed out that the fifth wave of the epidemic has already commenced. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that the Government will expand the "vaccine bubble" scheme on the 24th of next month to include all catering business and scheduled premises, as well as schools and some government cultural and leisure facilities, whether it has anticipated (i) the extent to which the COVID-19 vaccination rate will be raised as a result, and (ii) the situation of community infection before the implementation of the said measure; whether it will examine recovering the medical costs for providing treatments to those infected persons who are unvaccinated without medical grounds, upon implementation of the measure;

(2) of the anticipated impact that the fifth wave of the epidemic has on the resumption of normal traveller clearance between Hong Kong and the Mainland; whether it will hold meetings again with the Mainland experts group to discuss traveller clearance issues; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) as some experts have pointed out that herd immunity will be achieved only when more than 80 per cent of the population has completed the third-dose vaccination, but at present only about 70 per cent of Hong Kong's population has completed two doses of vaccination, while less than 10 per cent has received the third-dose vaccination, whether the Government will consider implementing a mandatory vaccination policy so that Hong Kong may achieve herd immunity as soon as possible; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted relevant bureaux, our reply to different parts of the question raised by the Hon Kennedy Wong is as follows:

(1) The Government has continuously adjusted social distancing measures in view of the development of COVID-19 epidemic situation. Starting from the second half of December 2021, the Omicron variant has replaced the Delta

variant to be the dominant mutant strain with a significant increase in Hong Kong's imported/import-related positive cases. Transmission in the community has also occurred with three clusters originating from imported cases of the Omicron variant. On January 23 and 24, 2022, the numbers of newly reported cases of local infection were 125 and 98 respectively. In view of the higher transmissibility of the Omicron variant with Hong Kong recording cases of the Delta variant, the Government has conducted epidemiological investigations to targeted clusters in the community promptly. Close contacts are also isolated and large-scale testing operations have taken place with a view to controlling the epidemic situation.

In response to the rapidly changing epidemic situation in January with the highly transmissible Omicron variant spreading to community, the Government has tightened social distancing measures in line with the most stringent level adopted during the third and fourth wave from January 7. Through discouraging members of the public from going out and gathering unnecessarily, it aims to curb the spread of the virus in the community. After considering the latest epidemic situation, the Chief Executive announced on January 14 that the current social distancing measures will be maintained until February 3 with a view to keeping the epidemic under control and cutting the transmission chains.

Depending on the latest development of COVID-19 epidemic situation and subject to the epidemic situation being under control, the Government will relax the operating restrictions of catering premises and scheduled premises in a gradual and orderly manner by expanding the "vaccine bubble" measures, which requires staff of relevant premises and/or visiting members of the public to be vaccinated with a view to increasing the overall vaccination rate in Hong Kong. This serves to reduce transmission risk and safeguard public health, build a protective shield for the community and help resume normal daily lives as soon as possible.

COVID-19 vaccination is highly effective in preventing serious illness and death and provides effective protection for recipients, avoiding serious complications or even death. A reduction in cases of serious illness due to COVID-19 would help avoid overstressing the public healthcare system with the outbreak. Therefore, the Government appeals to members of the public who have yet to receive vaccination, especially senior citizens, chronic patients and other immunocompromised persons who face a higher chance of death after COVID-19 infection, to get vaccinated as soon as possible for self-protection and for the society as a whole.

It has been the policy of the Government to provide public healthcare services to eligible persons at highly subsidised rates to ensure that no one will be denied adequate medical care due to lack of means. At this stage, the Government has no intention to recover medical costs on a cost-recovery basis from COVID-19 patients who are unvaccinated without medical grounds. Encouraging vaccination for all under the "vaccine bubble" remains the key component in Hong Kong's overall anti-epidemic strategy against COVID-19 which in turns protect public health and our public healthcare system.

(2) With the staunch support by the Central Government, the Hong Kong Special

Administrative Region Government (HKSAR Government) has made steady progress in the resumption of quarantine-free travel between the Mainland and Hong Kong with a lot of preparatory work being done, including multiple meetings on Mainland and Hong Kong anti-epidemic work and visit by Mainland expert delegation. The HKSAR Government will continue to adopt a "preventing the importation of cases and the spreading of the virus in the community" anti-epidemic strategy and achieve dynamic "zero infection". The HKSAR Government strives to cut the mutant strain transmission chains in the community as quickly as possible, aiming to achieve no local infection in 14 consecutive days. At the same time, through the continuous increase in vaccination rate, favourable conditions can be created for quarantine-free travel.

(3) The COVID-19 epidemic is still rampant across the globe and vaccination is the best measure and hope for Hong Kong and the world to ride out the epidemic. The COVID-19 Vaccination Programme led by the Government was launched in late February last year. As at January 24, about 5.26 million people had received the first dose vaccine, accounting for over 78.1 per cent of the population aged 12 or above. Over 810 000 people had received the third dose vaccine.

To combat the epidemic, the Government has been strongly appealing to and encouraging the public to get vaccinated, with a view to protecting the community by increasing the vaccination rate in Hong Kong. The Government is also committed to providing a variety of vaccination channels to enable members of the public to receive vaccination conveniently. Recently, the public's willingness to get vaccinated has increased. The Government immediately increased the vaccination capacity and provided more vaccination channels. In total, the Government currently has 14 Community Vaccination Centres; 13 COVID-19 Vaccination Stations located at public hospitals; two mobile vaccination stations shuttling between various housing estates and locations; 25 general out-patient clinics of the Hospital Authority; more than 1 000 private doctors or clinics; and 26 service locations operated by private healthcare institutions. The number of monthly doses that can be administered exceeds 1.3 million. From January 18 to 24, over 40 000 doses were administered daily on average, including an average of some 16 000 people receiving the first dose, and an average of some 20 000 people receiving the third dose.

For elderly persons whose vaccination rate has been persistently low, the Government proactively encourages them to speed up vaccination and have introduced a basket of facilitating measures, including handing out same-day tickets at Community Vaccination Centres only to eligible persons aged 60 or above, and providing vaccination for elders at the 15 Elderly Health Centres under the Department of Health. Also, District Health Centres (DHC) and DHC Expresses at various districts strive to assist those in need, especially the elderly, in making appointments for vaccination. At the same time, they collaborate with network doctors to render outreach vaccination services. Furthermore, since October 25, 2021, the Social Welfare Department has implemented the Assess and Vaccinate Programme at residential care homes (RCHs) around Hong Kong (including residential care homes for the elderly and persons with disabilities). Arrangements are made for unvaccinated residents

to have health assessments by Visiting Medical Officers (VMOs) arranged by the RCHs or vaccination teams arranged by the Government. Upon confirmation that a resident is suitable for receiving vaccination, and that his/her family members do not clearly oppose vaccination and confirmed that they understand the risks posed to the resident, other residents and staff of the RCH by the resident not being vaccinated, the Sinovac vaccine would be administered to the resident by VMOs or vaccination teams under the informed consent of the resident or his/her legal guardian, so as to give early protection to him/her and other residents as well as staff of RCHs. During the period, VMOs or vaccination teams also provide health talks/health consultation to residents and their families in need so that they can better understand the vaccine effectiveness to allay their concerns. Compared with the start of January, the vaccination rate of the elderly has increased. Close to 58 per cent of those aged 70 to 79 have received the first dose vaccine, and the vaccination rate of those aged 80 and above has also increased to close to 30 per cent. On the other hand, the Government has also expanded the eligibility age to cover children aged five to 11 so that they can also benefit from the protection of vaccines.

To guard against the threat posed by the mutant virus strains with high transmissibility to the Hong Kong community, the Government will continue to encourage persons who have yet to receive COVID-19 vaccination to get vaccinated as early as possible for self-protection. Eligible persons should also receive a third dose vaccine as soon as possible to enhance protection and build a protective barrier in the community. As mentioned above, expanding the "vaccine bubble" measures will help spur members of the public to get vaccinated. Based on the current steadily rising vaccination rate, the Government is confident that the vaccination rate of 80 per cent or higher can be achieved in the short term. The Government will also closely monitor the development of the epidemic situation both globally and locally, the vaccination progress in Hong Kong, as well as the recommendations of the World Health Organization and overseas regulatory authorities on COVID-19 vaccines. After balancing relevant factors, the Government will consider implementing further measures to boost the vaccination rate in Hong Kong. The Government does not preclude the implementation of any possible measures.