

## LCQ16: COVID-19 virus testing services

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Han-pan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 5):

Question:

To cope with the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic, the Government has set up distribution points at 47 general outpatient clinics under the Hospital Authority (outpatient clinics), 121 post offices and 20 MTR stations for members of the public to obtain deep throat saliva specimen collection packs (collection packs). Members of the public may return the deep throat saliva specimens (specimens) collected by themselves to designated collection points at specified hours for the COVID-19 virus testing (testing). In addition, the Government provides testing services for persons of target groups. Some members of the public have complained that the collection packs distributed at the distribution points have been in severe shortage, especially in the Islands District. Regarding the testing services, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the criteria adopted by the authorities for determining (i) the locations of the distribution points, and (ii) the specified hours for collecting the specimens;

(2) of the current average daily total number of collection packs distributed at the distribution points in each District Council district, and the ratio of such number to the population of the district concerned; whether it will, in districts with a severe shortage of collection packs, expeditiously set up additional distribution points and increase the quantities of collection packs for distribution;

(3) in respect of the past 30 days, of the average daily (i) time taken for each of the distribution points at outpatient clinics and post offices to finish distribution of all collection packs after commencement of distribution, and (ii) waiting time for members of the public at the distribution point concerned (set out in a table);

(4) in respect of each of the distribution points at MTR stations in the past 30 days, of the average daily (i) number of collection packs supplied, and (ii) time taken to finish distribution of all collection packs after commencement of distribution (set out in a table); given that at such distribution points there are often long queues for obtaining collection packs and distribution of all collection packs finishes momentarily, whether the authorities will increase the quantities of collection packs for distribution and improve the distribution procedure;

(5) since the commencement of the authorities' services of arranging on-site testing as well as distribution and collection of collection packs for

construction site workers and other target groups, of the testing coverage rate and the number of confirmed cases in respect of each group, and whether it will consider designating new target groups; if so, of the details and timetable; if not, the reasons for that; and

(6) of Hong Kong's current maximum testing capacity, and whether it can increase the testing capacity?

Reply:

President,

Virus testing is an integral part of our anti-epidemic strategies. The Government's existing strategy aims to implement and expand the coverage of various testing measures, including requiring specified persons of high risk to undergo compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, arranging targeted groups to undergo testing on an obligatory basis, and encouraging more members of the public to undergo testing on a voluntary basis.

With regard to the Hon Chan Han-pan's question, our reply is as follows:

(1) to (4) The Government has all along been providing convenient testing services to the public through various channels to encourage and facilitate members of the public to undergo testing, so as to achieve the objective of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment" and cut the transmission chains as early as possible.

Starting from late July 2020, to facilitate individuals who perceive themselves as having a higher risk of exposure or experience mild discomfort to undergo free testing, they can collect and return specimen bottles at 22 general out-patient clinics (GOPCs) of the Hospital Authority (HA). The HA has for several times increased the number of GOPCs distributing specimen collection packs, extended the distribution hours of specimen collection packs and installed multiple vending machines. Moreover, since end-November and early-December, more distribution points of specimen collection packs are set up at post offices and MTR stations to further facilitate members of the public to obtain specimen collection packs.

Currently, there are 188 distribution points in 18 districts offering free specimen collection packs. Members of the public can obtain deep throat saliva specimen collection packs at 47 HA GOPCs, 121 post offices or vending machines set up at 20 MTR stations for free, and return their specimens at designated hours to the 47 HA GOPCs, 13 clinics of the Department of Health or 23 specimen collection points at Government premises.

Due to the surge of demand for regular testing from staff of catering business, scheduled premises and construction sector within a short period of time, the number of specimen collection packs distributed was relatively high in late February this year. In view of the surge in demand, we have set up two more community testing centres in March 2021; and the number of tests available for appointments at community testing centres has been increased

from the original over 20 000 each day to more than 26 000 and 32 000 in late February and early March respectively, and further increased to more than 38 000 per day now, with more manpower deployed to serve the public. In addition, the Government have worked with testing operators to increase about 20 mobile specimen collection stations in a number of districts to divert the demand of different sectors.

Since last July, the number of specimen collection packs distributed in Hong Kong has been increased substantially. In April 2021, a daily average of around 33 000 specimen collection packs were distributed by the Government, equivalent to 27 times the number last July and August during the third wave of the epidemic (a daily average of around 1 200 packs). Over the past few months, the number of specimen bottles collected by the Government is around half of the amount distributed. The Government calls on the public and organisations to refrain from collecting more sets of packs than needed so that others in need can also obtain specimen collection packs for testing.

Starting from April 29, under the relaxed social distancing measures under "vaccine bubble", staff of catering businesses operating under Types C and D and six types of scheduled premises (namely bars or pubs; clubs or nightclubs; bathhouses; party rooms; karaoke establishments; and mahjong-tin kau premises) who are unfit to receive vaccination because of health reasons must submit a declaration form and present a medical certificate to the employer, and undergo a nucleic acid test using combined nasal and throat swabs every seven days. In other words, they have to undergo testing and specimen collection by combined nasal and throat swabs at community testing centres or mobile specimen collection stations, and they cannot use specimen collection packs to self-collect deep throat saliva specimens, so as to enable individuals who perceive themselves as having a higher risk of exposure or experience mild discomfort to obtain specimen collection packs for testing.

(5) For targeted testing, the Government continues to arrange testing for targeted groups based on risk assessment. At present, testing is being provided continuously for targeted groups including staff and personnel working in markets, licensed hawkers, practitioners of cold stores, designated frontline employees of Kwai Tsing Container Terminals. New targeted groups including foreign domestic helpers, construction site workers, couriers (including takeaway food couriers) and security and guarding personnel have been added. A total of 1 710 000 tests were carried out under testing for targeted groups from November 15, 2020 to April 28, 2021, equivalent to a daily average of around 10 400 tests with 0.01 per cent tested positive. The Government will regularly review the coverage and frequency of targeted group testing with reference to the latest epidemic risk assessment.

(6) The Government has been stepping up surveillance and testing efforts in a multi-pronged approach. Through the efforts of the Government and the co-operation of the agencies, the current maximum daily testing capacity of public and private laboratories has been substantially increased to approximately 100 000 tests per day (without sample pooling). Through various

channels of specimen collection, the Government can collect samples from a maximum of about 80 000 members of the public for testing each day. The Government will continue to proactively leverage the current testing capability to expand further the scale of testing in the community, giving full play to the strategy that all specified persons will be compulsorily tested, while making testing services available as far as possible to targeted groups which should be tested and people who would like to be tested, in order to identify cases as early as possible and cut the transmission chains in the community.