

LCQ16: Health impacts of the chemicals used to disperse crowds

Following is a question by Professor the Hon Joseph Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (November 13):

Question:

Since June this year, during their operations to disperse demonstrators in various districts, the Police used pepper sprays, fired pepper balls and tear gas rounds, as well as deployed specialised crowd management vehicles (commonly known as "water cannon vehicles") to spray coloured water containing irritants. The Secretary for Food and Health has indicated earlier that the impacts of tear gas on human health are short-term. However, it has been pointed out in an article published recently in the Lancet, a medical journal, that an overseas research study found that among 5 910 people who had been exposed to such chemical irritants, two died and many suffered permanent disabilities. The authors of the article have criticised the Hong Kong Government for neither taking the lead in cleaning the places contaminated by these chemicals nor issuing decontamination guidelines and health advice. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the respective human health risks posed by (i) pepper spray, (ii) tear gas and (iii) coloured water; whether it has monitored continuously the latest reports on the risks posed by such chemicals to physical health and public health; if it has not, of the reasons for that;

(2) of the number of street cleaning exercises carried out since June this year by the service contractors of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department for removing the chemicals concerned, with a breakdown by District Council district; the protective gear provided to the frontline workers; whether the Department has monitored if the workers employed by the contractors have removed the chemicals in accordance with the guidelines; whether the Government will take the initiative to assist the persons-in-charge of private places in removing such chemicals;

(3) given that some members of the public whose bodies had been stained with coloured water went to seek medical treatment but the doctors were unable to prescribe the right treatment because they did not know the composition of the coloured water, whether the Government will fully make public the composition of the various types of chemicals used by the Police, so that persons exposed to such chemicals may receive appropriate treatment; and

(4) whether it will request the Police not to use such chemicals again in the vicinity of residential areas, schools, residential care homes for the elderly, hospitals, food premises and densely populated areas, so as to avoid causing hazards to the health and lives of members of the public?

Reply:

President,

The Government appeals to the public to express their demands in a peaceful and rational way, to embody democracy under the principles of tolerance and respect, and to uphold the rule of law by lawful and reasonable means.

The Police have a statutory duty to maintain law and order. When public order and safety are severely threatened by incidents such as illegal road blockage, paralysed traffic, unlawful assemblies and violent charging of police cordon lines, etc, the Police will take appropriate actions after risk assessment to maintain law and order. Pepper spray, tear gas and Specialised Crowd Management Vehicles (SCMVs) are equipment used to disperse crowd, the purpose of which is to stop people from gathering or committing illegal acts.

In consultation with the Security Bureau, the Department of Health (DH), the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), and the Hospital Authority (HA), consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by Professor the Hon Joseph Lee is as follows:

(1) On health effects of tear gas, in consultation with relevant departments and experts, the DH has uploaded health information on tear gas to the website of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) for general public's reference. Please visit the CHP website (www.chp.gov.hk/en/index.html) > Health Topics > Health and Hygiene > Health Information on Tear Gas for the information. In general, health effects of tear gas depend on a number of factors such as the specific chemical composition of the tear gas, duration and dose of exposure, exposure route, health conditions of the individuals and the physical environment during exposure. Individuals who had been exposed to tear gas with persistent symptoms should promptly consult healthcare professionals.

Symptoms that may generally occur after exposure to pepper spray include a burning sensation of the skin and discomfort in the eyes, etc. These symptoms would usually disappear within a short period of time after the exposure.

According to Police's information, the colourant used in the SCMVs is non-toxic and will not cause bodily harm. When using the SCMVs, Police may also add in pepper based solution having regard to actual needs. The main effect of pepper based solution is similar to pepper spray. Exposure to pepper based solution will cause one to have a burning sensation of the skin and discomfort in the eyes, but these symptoms would usually disappear after a short period of time.

(2) The personal safety as well as the occupational safety and health of government employees and outsourced workers (including cleansing workers) are of vital importance. The FEHD has issued guidelines to its employees and

cleansing service contractors, including reminders and suggestions on personal protective equipment for cleaning residues of tear gas and chemicals from SCMV's. The guidelines stipulate, among others, that cleansing workers should wear masks, rubber gloves, rubber aprons when conducting relevant works, and put on respirators (N95 type or comparable), eye protectors and hats if considered necessary after risk assessment. Cleansing workers should, upon discovery of dangerous goods or chemical waste, report to the FEHD which will then refer the case to relevant departments.

As stipulated in the FEHD's public cleansing service contracts, contractors shall comply with all legislations in relation to contract execution, including the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance (Cap. 509) and its subsidiary legislations. They are also required to provide their employees with adequate personal protective clothing, equipment and safety training, and make appropriate work arrangements.

The FEHD does not keep the statistics on frequency of street washing conducted for removal of chemicals by its cleansing service contractors.

(3) The colourant used in Police's SCMV's is non-toxic. When using the SCMV's, the Police may also add in pepper based solution having regard to actual needs. The main effect of pepper based solution is similar to pepper spray.

According to the HA, there were cases where people attended the accident and emergency (A&E) departments of the HA due to discomfort after exposure to tear gas or blue liquid sprayed by SCMV's. Those who were exposed to tear gas or blue liquid generally experienced mild respiratory and skin irritation, and there was no serious health impact reported. Most of them could be immediately discharged after rinsing and receiving treatment at the A&E departments. Decontamination facilities are available at all 18 A&E departments of the HA for treating patients who have been exposed to biochemical/hazardous substances. Healthcare personnel are also experienced in treating these cases.

(4) The Government reiterates that if the public can express their views in a peaceful and rational manner, the Police do not need to use any force. Police have been committed to safeguarding the public safety and public order of Hong Kong. We hope that members of the public would understand this.

Police understand the community's concerns about the use of tear gas near residential buildings, and will take into account the safety and interests of the affected people as far as possible when using the tear gas. Before the operation, the Police will, as far as possible, maintain close contact with the nearby building management offices, commercial tenants and elderly homes through various channels to remind them of Police's possible actions in relation to the demonstration activities so that they can make arrangements accordingly. During the operation, the Police will also appeal to residents in the vicinity to pay attention to the situation through social media and press releases, and to close the windows and stay in a safe place indoors if necessary.