

LCQ16: Prevention and control of bedbug infestation

Following is a question by the Hon Yang Wing-kit and a written reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (November 29):

Question:

It has been reported that in recent months, bedbug infestations have spread from European countries such as France and the United Kingdom to South Korea where bedbugs can be found in public places such as hotels, cinemas and gosiwons. On the other hand, with the post-epidemic boom of "revenge travel" around the world, some pest control experts opine that bedbugs might be imported to Hong Kong in large numbers. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has assessed the risks and consequences of a bedbug outbreak in Hong Kong; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) whether it will set up a mechanism to monitor and make public the distribution and spread of bedbug infestations in Hong Kong; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether it will improve the dedicated thematic webpage on "Bed Bugs" in the website of the Centre for Health Protection under the Department of Health, including the provision of additional contents such as the Government's preparatory work and contingency plans, recommended bedbug control products for purchase, a list of vendors selling bedbug control products, and a list of countries/regions affected by bedbug infestations, as well as set up a hotline providing the relevant information; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(4) of the types and stocks of bedbug control equipment and insecticides currently used by the Government, and whether it will procure additional bedbug control equipment and insecticides; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(5) whether it has plans to set up bedbug control squads in the event of a bedbug outbreak to help the underprivileged groups deal with bedbug infestations in their flats, as well as to distribute bedbug control products (in particular bedbug spray) to members of the public in need; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(6) whether it will issue to all schools, hospitals, public housing estates, venues managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, cinemas, public transport operators, among others, in Hong Kong, guidelines on bedbug prevention and control as well as disinfection and cleansing, including

requesting the MTR Corporation Limited to carry out regular disinfection with steam cleaners at MTR stations and the West Kowloon Station of Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link, and requesting the Airport Authority Hong Kong to carry out disinfection in the same manner at the airport during bedbug outbreaks; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Bedbugs are common in tropical and subtropical areas, but less common in cold areas. There is speculation that climate change might have led to sudden proliferation of bedbugs in cold areas, hence causing local attention. Bedbugs are not uncommon in Hong Kong, and the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health (DH) has pointed out that there is no evidence that bedbugs can transmit diseases. Nevertheless, considering that bedbug infestation from other places may be brought into Hong Kong through passengers and transportation (such as aircraft and cruise ships, etc.), the Government attaches great importance to the problem, and has taken prompt actions to strengthen the prevention of bedbug transmission.

In consultation with the CHP of the DH, the Home Affairs Department (HAD) and the Housing Department (HD), my reply to the question raised by the Hon Yang Wing-kit is as follows:

(1) Relevant departments of the Government have maintained close communication with the frontline sectors (including the Airport Authority, the MTR Corporation Limited (MTRCL), cruise terminals, the hotel sector, the public transport sector and the pest control sector, etc.) and have conducted risk assessments on the possibility of local outbreaks arising from the import of bedbug infestation. According to the relevant sectors, there have been no noticeable indications of imported bedbug infestation. They are confident that the problem could be managed and have taken proactive measures, including performing sustained deep cleansing and disinfestation work as well as strengthened anti-bedbug work, on premises and in transportation under their purview to safeguard the first line of defence.

The Government will continue to monitor the development of the situation. It will also strengthen its communication with relevant sectors, continue to provide technical and information support as well as step up publicity and education work, with a view to preventing the import of bedbug infestation with all sectors concerted.

(2) Bedbugs typically inhabit near places where human sleep, for example under mattresses and carpets, behind the walls, and inside the cracks of furniture. Public places in general are not their harbourages or habitats. Therefore, it is relatively difficult to set up a monitoring system for bedbug infestation in public places. Bedbugs are not a vector, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has not provided any advice or guidelines on their surveillance.

The Government will continue to maintain close communication with the relevant sectors in order to grasp and assess the situation of the import of bedbug infestation on premises and in transportation under their purview. Moreover, the Pest Control Steering Committee (the Committee), which comprises members from three policy bureaux and 21 government departments and organisations, has established a notification system in relation to bedbug infestation. Under the notification system, if there is a bedbug infestation outbreak on a department's premises, the department concerned needs to notify the Committee. The Committee will discuss the direction of anti-bedbug work and follow-up measures, and report the progress of the relevant work to the Deputy Chief Secretary for Administration. The Committee will also make public its work where necessary.

(3) Regarding the dissemination of information, a thematic webpage on bedbugs has been set up on the website of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD). The webpage gives detailed information on the biological properties of bedbugs (including that bedbugs may cause skin irritation as a result of their biting, and that they are not important media in transmitting diseases), and provides effective ways of bedbug prevention and control for public reference. In addition, factors to be considered in selecting a pest control company have been uploaded onto the FEHD's website to facilitate the public in purchasing suitable services to tackle bedbug infestation on private premises. For enquiries on tackling bedbugs, the public may contact the FEHD at 2868 0000. At present, the WHO has not drawn up a list of the countries/regions affected by bedbug infestation.

Moreover, the CHP of the DH will update the health information on its thematic webpage on bedbugs as appropriate.

(4) Currently, if the FEHD finds any discarded furniture items in its public refuse collection points infested with bedbugs, it will spray a synthetic-pyrethroid pesticide with residual effect on such items, so as to prevent the spread of bedbugs to nearby areas. As the FEHD has a sufficient stock of the pesticide and there is abundant supply in the market, it has no plan for additional procurement at the moment.

(5) Regarding the bedbug infestation problem among the underprivileged, the FEHD will contact the HAD and seek assistance from the District Services and Community Care Teams in disseminating practical information on maintaining home and environmental hygiene and preventing and eliminating bedbugs to residents of subdivided units and "three-nil" buildings. For tenants living in public housing estates who are unable to deal with bedbugs by themselves, staff of the estate offices under the HD will, depending on the situations, provide them with assistance or refer the cases to social welfare organisations for follow-up.

The FEHD will continue to provide technical advice on the prevention and control of bedbugs for social welfare organisations and volunteer groups that assist underprivileged families in dealing with the bedbug problem. It will also assist the relevant groups by clearing the discarded articles during their anti-bedbug operations.

(6) The Government will continue to strengthen the publicity and education work on preventing the import of bedbug infestation. Besides on-site inspections at the airport and cruise terminals as well as distribution of promotional leaflets by the FEHD and the DH earlier on, the relevant government departments have disseminated guidelines and leaflets on bedbug prevention and control to the hotel and tourism sector and the public transport sector (including the Airport Authority, the MTRCL as well as land and sea transport operators), etc., with a view to reducing the risks of importing bedbugs at source and enabling the sectors to grasp the effective ways for prevention and elimination of bedbugs. Upon receipt of reports of suspected bedbug detection, the MTRCL will conduct thorough inspections on the trains and carry out deep cleansing with steam.

In addition, the Committee has disseminated the relevant guidelines and leaflets to its members and other stakeholders, so as to enhance the knowledge of the contractors of the departments' premises and the general public on the ways to prevent the import of bedbug infestation and to handle bedbugs.