

LCQ18: Coronavirus Disease 2019

testing services

Following is a question by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 12):

Question:

Currently, the Government has set up distribution points at designated general outpatient clinics under the Hospital Authority (outpatient clinics), post offices and 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 specimen collection points (collection points) at specified hours for free Coronavirus Disease 2019 testing (testing). Some members of the public have relayed that since February this year when the Government started requiring the persons-in-charge of catering businesses and some scheduled premises to arrange for their staff to undergo testing once every 14 days, there has been a shortage of collection packs at various distribution points, rendering those persons who have to complete testing at a scheduled time unable to obtain collection packs in time. They have also pointed out that a majority of those persons who are required to regularly undergo testing do not know that, apart from obtaining collection packs and returning specimens, they may also go to the Community Testing Centres for free testing. Moreover, there are often long queues at the mobile specimen collection stations set up by the Government in the vicinity of the restricted areas/specified premises set out in the relevant mandatory testing declarations/notices. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) in respect of the various distribution points set up at (i) outpatient clinics, (ii) post offices and (iii) MTR stations, of the average (a) respective daily and monthly numbers of collection packs distributed, and (b) daily time taken to finish distribution of all collection packs after commencement of distribution, since January this year;
- (2) whether it will set up additional distribution points and increase the quantities of collection packs for distribution at the various distribution points;
- (3) whether it will extend the time for collecting specimens at the various collection points to facilitate the return of specimens by members of the public;
- (4) whether it will step up publicity on the categories of persons to whom the Community Testing Centres are providing free testing, so as to alleviate the demand for collection packs; and

(5) whether it has reviewed the situation of queuing for testing at those mobile specimen collection stations set up in the vicinity of the restricted areas/specified premises, and whether it will increase the manpower for those stations, so as to avoid a rise in the risk of the epidemic spreading as a result of members of the public waiting for a long time for testing?

Reply:

President,

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.

With regard to the Hon Kwok Wai-keung's question, our reply is as follows:

(1) to (3) 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) for free. 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 have been 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 to the public. 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.

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 Police earlier received intelligence that someone made profit through resale of specimen collection packs obtained from distribution points on online trading platforms, and arrested one male suspected to be in connection with the case after investigation. The Government calls on the public and organisations to refrain from collecting more sets of packs than needed or making a profit through resale, 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 cannot use specimen collection packs to self-collect deep throat saliva specimens. The above arrangement will alleviate the demand for specimen collection packs and make it easier for individuals who perceive themselves as having a higher risk of exposure or experience mild discomfort to obtain specimen collection packs for testing.

(4) to (5) 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 mobile specimen collection stations in a number of districts to divert the demand of different sectors.

At present, persons of certain targeted groups (including employees of scheduled premises and catering businesses, construction site personnel, school staff), residents and workers subject to compulsory testing, as well as persons with "LeaveHomeSafe" COVID-19 exposure notification may receive free testing at community testing centres. The Government announces the relevant information through press releases and the latest lists of such eligible persons are posted at the community testing centres. Moreover, about 20 mobile specimen collection stations are in operation to provide free testing to the public (see the locations and service scope at www.communitytest.gov.hk/en/station/). Some of them are dedicated to providing free services to staff of catering businesses and scheduled premises, and local residents and workers subject to compulsory testing.

To enable the working population to undergo testing on their rest days or before/after work, the community testing centres are open daily from 8am to 1.30pm and from 2.30pm to 8pm, even on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays. Meanwhile, mobile specimen collection stations are generally open daily from 10am to 8pm. The Government would take into account various factors such as the number of persons subject to compulsory testing when issuing compulsory testing notices to ensure that persons subject to compulsory testing would have sufficient time to undergo testing. They may

also choose to undergo testing via different routes, and it is not a must to complete testing at particular time slots or locations. When making restriction-testing declarations, the Government would also make arrangements to carry out testing for all persons present in the restricted area as soon as possible, with the aim to complete testing of all identified persons and confirm the results by morning next day in order to keep the disturbance to residents' daily lives to the minimum.