

LCQ19: Work on preventing and fighting epidemic for elderly persons

Following is a question by the Hon Nelson Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (May 18):

Question:

Amid the fifth wave of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, over 95 per cent of the fatal cases have been elderly persons aged 60 or above, while residents in residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs) and residential care homes for persons with disabilities have accounted for more than 50 per cent of such fatal cases. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will regularly publish statistics related to (a) elderly persons aged 60 or above and (b) elderly persons living in RCHEs, including the respective numbers and percentages of (i) confirmed patients, (ii) fatal cases, (iii) those who have completed three doses of vaccination and (iv) those who are unvaccinated, so as to facilitate members of the public to grasp the relevant situations; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) as there are views that the Government failed in the past two years to boost the vaccination rate of elderly persons by taking measures appropriate to the situations, and it even suspended early this year the service of sending outreach vaccination teams to residential care homes (RCHs) to administer vaccines, resulting in a loophole for epidemic prevention and deaths of the residents, whether the Government will formulate a long-term vaccination strategy and roadmap for elderly persons (especially those in RCHEs); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether the inter-departmental task force, set up earlier on by the Government to examine the capabilities of RCHs in fighting the epidemic, will put in place a contingency response mechanism to protect the life of elderly persons in RCHEs in case the sixth wave of the epidemic breaks out, including providing manpower support for those RCHEs which face manpower shortage due to their staff being infected, and providing safe isolation and holding facilities for elderly persons; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

Regarding the question raised by the Hon Nelson Lam, my reply is as follows:

(1) In view of the fifth wave of epidemic, the Government has regularly published relevant statistical data on number of confirmed cases, deaths and vaccination status of different age groups (including elderly persons aged 60 or above) through its thematic website. The concerned link is as follows: www.covidvaccine.gov.hk/pdf/death_analysis.pdf.

(2) Since the launch of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme in February 2021, the Government has continuously appealed to and encouraged elderly persons to receive vaccination as soon as possible. The first batch of target group for vaccination was high-risk population, which included elderly persons. Apart from joining hands with the medical profession to step up the work on explaining effects of vaccination to elderly persons and their family members to ease their concerns with better understanding, the Government has introduced various facilitation measures, including same-day tickets for elderly persons aged 60 or above in Community Vaccination Centres, the Home Vaccination Service, approaching and assisting service users of the Department of Health (DH), the Hospital Authority (HA) and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) to register for vaccination, and providing vaccination service through designated Elderly Health Centres under the DH, designated General Out-patient Clinics under the HA and District Health Centres (DHCs) and DHC Expresses in various districts.

Since the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic in February this year, confirmed cases were found in various residential care homes (RCHs). To enable suitable RCH residents to receive COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible, the Government had appealed to visiting registered medical practitioners and medical institutions to redeploy resources and accord priority to serving residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs) and residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs). At the same time, we mobilised and assisted personnel from the medical sector to form outreach teams to provide health assessment and vaccination service for RCH residents as soon as possible. As at May 10, a total of 14 medical institutions/organisations (including 13 teams comprising private medical practitioners and a team comprising public servants from the DH) and more than 200 visiting registered medical practitioners took up the task of providing outreach vaccination service to about 1 100 RCHs, involving more than 700 medical personnel in total.

The Government has completed three phases of RCH outreach vaccination service between March 18 and May 10, during which medical teams and visiting registered medical practitioners had visited RCHs 4 347 times. With the joint efforts of all parties, the overall first dose vaccination rate of RCH residents has risen from 55 per cent in mid-March to 84 per cent as at May 10, with the rate at RCHEs standing at 82 per cent and the rate at RCHDs at 89 per cent. The overall second dose and third dose vaccination rate at the RCHs at the same time is 56 per cent and 14 per cent respectively.

Currently, all RCHs have been paired with medical institutions/organisations or visiting registered medical practitioners for vaccination services. Relevant medical teams will continue to provide vaccination for RCH residents according to the latter's vaccination schedule.

The Government will continue to take forward related work.

(3) Elderly persons belong to a group of people with the greatest risk in the epidemic, especially those elderly persons living in RCHs. The Government attaches utmost importance to the protection of elderly persons, who are our priority target group in anti-epidemic works. In order to enhance the overall capability of RCHEs and RCHDs in fighting against the epidemic and in coping a possible sixth wave of epidemic, the Government has set up an inter-departmental task force led by the Labour and Welfare Bureau to examine the RCHs' capabilities and discuss effective and feasible improvement measures. Members of the task force comprises representatives of the Food and Health Bureau, the Development Bureau, the SWD, the DH, the Fire Services Department, the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department and the HA.

The task force is discussing various measures to prepare for a possible next wave of epidemic, for example, improvements to the ventilation of RCHs to minimise the risk of virus transmission within the premises concerned, enhancement of infection control in RCHs as well as improvements to the co-ordination between RCHs and government departments. When appropriate, the task force will announce its work progress.