

LCQ2: Encouraging members of public to receive vaccination

Following is a question by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (June 9):

Question:

As at the end of last month, there were about one million members of the public in the territory who had received two doses of vaccines against the coronavirus disease 2019, accounting for 15 per cent of the local population aged 16 or above. An expert on epidemiology has pointed out that such a take-up rate is inadequate to build a herd immunity barrier to guard Hong Kong against the outbreak of a new wave of epidemic. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the targeted publicity and education programmes to allay public concerns over the safety of the vaccines;
- (2) whether it will adopt a multi-pronged approach to spur various public and private organisations to provide incentives to encourage their staff to receive vaccination; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (3) as an expert on epidemiology has pointed out that persons who have been fully vaccinated have a very low chance of contracting or spreading the disease, whether the Government will relax the restrictions on immigration, social distancing, resumption of classes, etc. to which such persons are subject; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government launched the "Early Vaccination for All" campaign with an aim to building an immune barrier in Hong Kong as soon as possible by significantly raising the vaccination rate during the critical period from now until the end of August, thereby restoring normality to society sooner rather than later.

In consultation with the Education Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Yung Hoi-yan is as follows:

- (1) The Government has followed the principles of openness, transparency, accuracy and timeliness and adopted a science-based approach to provide members of the public with the latest information on COVID-19 vaccines through different channels and made public the views of experts, so as to build up social momentum and improve citizens' willingness to get vaccinated.

To provide the public a one-stop destination to learn about the latest information on COVID-19 vaccines, we have launched the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme thematic website to explain the principles of the vaccines, their protection and need-to-know facts, etc. We have recently added new features to the thematic website and set up a data dashboard to publish latest information regarding vaccination, including the number of doses administered, remaining days of operation and remaining quotas of the Community Vaccination Centres, etc.

In terms of publicity and education, the Department of Health (DH) has produced a large amount of materials delivered via different media channels for promotion to urge members of the public to get vaccinated. We understand that science-based evidence is particularly important. The DH therefore invited family doctors to participate in informative programmes to assess whether different cases are suitable for receiving vaccines. For example, the DH is now collaborating with the Hospital Authority and Radio Television Hong Kong for several weeks, through the programme "Vaccine Line", to explain whether different illnesses will affect the effectiveness and safety of COVID-19 vaccination. The programme also answers public enquiries so that members of the public would feel at ease about getting vaccinated.

The two vaccines currently provided in Hong Kong are safe, efficacious and of good quality. Having considered that members of the public are concerned about adverse events following COVID-19 vaccination, we issue a weekly press release to provide updated statistics and relevant information on monitoring COVID-19 vaccination. The comparison figures of adverse events out of those with and without vaccination as well as the respective baseline reference figures have also been uploaded to the thematic website. So far, there is no death case identified by the Expert Committee on Clinical Events Assessment Following COVID-19 Immunisation as having causal relationship with COVID-19 vaccination.

We will continue to disseminate accurate and comprehensive information on COVID-19 vaccination in an open and transparent manner. We will also step up monitoring of false information on vaccines within the community and make clarifications as necessary. For example, we have repeatedly explained that COVID-19 vaccines are being used in large scale around the world. This has provided us substantial real world data to prove that unless one has contraindications, the vast majority of people are suitable for vaccination. The public really does not need to wait and should get vaccinated as soon as possible. They should consult a doctor if there are any concerns.

(2) and (3) Since the start of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, about 2.71 million doses of vaccines had been administered and about 1.58 million of them were the first dose, accounting for 24.1 per cent of the population aged 16 or above in Hong Kong. To encourage members of the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible, various measures are being gradually rolled out by the Government and different sectors in the community.

Facilitating vaccination

To take the lead, government employees will be entitled to a day of vaccination leave or be allowed to apply for one day of authorised absence for each vaccination dose received. A high vaccine take-up rate is beneficial for our society and businesses. The Government appeals to organisations and enterprises to encourage their staff to get vaccinated, and to arrange vaccination leave and other facilitation measures where practicable.

Facilitating gatherings

The Government will further relax social distancing measures with the "vaccine bubble" concept as the basis, including relaxation of the maximum number of persons allowed at premises and group gatherings, the maximum capacity of premises and operation hours, the types of activities allowed, the distance among groups, and the mask-wearing requirement.

Facilitating travelling

The Government has shortened the quarantine period for fully vaccinated persons arriving at Hong Kong under the "vaccine bubble" concept. When the Government discusses travel arrangements with other countries or regions in the future, vaccination before travel will be a necessary requirement to ensure that citizens will have sufficient protection during travel.

Vaccination in lieu of regular testing

The vaccination in lieu of regular testing approach is being implemented for front-line government employees to safeguard their health. Front-line employees who have received the first dose of a vaccine and provided their vaccination record could be exempted from regular testing.

Arrangements for class resumption

The Education Bureau has been encouraging teachers and staff of schools to get vaccinated and encouraging schools to provide them with facilitation. The Education Bureau has also issued letters to encourage schools in Hong Kong to arrange vaccination leave for teachers and staff for receiving vaccination. When considering the resumption of full-day classes and other anti-epidemic measures in the future, the Government will consider the overall vaccine take-up rate of teachers and staff as well as students in each school and consider allowing more learning time and activities to resume.

Vaccination promotion activities

The Government welcomes the incentives actively provided by the commercial sector and organisations to encourage members of the public to receive COVID-19 vaccines. We understand that the commercial sector and many organisations are considering to organise lucky draw activities for this. In order to facilitate their applications for the relevant licence(s), the Government will expedite the processing of the relevant applications and

assist in conducting verification, etc.

Last week in Hong Kong, a confirmed case with unknown source of infection involving the highly transmissible mutant strain emerged, sounding the alarm for the epidemic. The fifth wave of the epidemic could strike at any time and could possibly involve mutant strains with higher transmissibility and bringing greater threats. The two vaccines provided by the Government fulfil the criteria of safety, efficacy and quality. Only through the "Early Vaccination for All" campaign can Hong Kong build a barrier for protection with no delay.

Thank you, President.