

LCQ2: Virus testing and vaccination services relating to the epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Luk Chung-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 27):

Question:

The Government has, in view of the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic, engaged contractors/operators to provide virus testing and vaccination services. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the list of contractors/operators engaged to provide the aforesaid services, as well as the number of service contracts awarded to them;
- (2) whether open tendering exercises were conducted for the relevant service contracts; if so, of the relevant mechanism and assessment criteria; if not, the reasons for that; among the awarded service contracts, of the mechanism in place to ensure that the contractors/operators protect labour rights and interests, for instance, whether the contents of the employment contracts they sign with employees have been regulated to prevent the occurrence of false self-employment;
- (3) whether it has evaluated the standard of the services provided by the aforesaid contractors/operators, including the quality and efficiency of such services; if not, of the reasons for that; and
- (4) whether mechanism is in place to encourage other healthcare institutions to join as the contractors/operators for providing the aforesaid services?

Reply:

President,

The Government has been implementing a risk-based virus testing strategy and ramping up testing capacity significantly, with a view to achieving "early identification, early isolation and early treatment" through "restriction-testing declaration", compulsory testing and voluntary testing, to cut transmission chains in the community as early as possible. At the same time, COVID-19 vaccination is a strong and effective measure for stopping the spread of the virus and preventing severe cases, hospitalisation and death. It is an important pillar of the Government's anti-epidemic strategy. We strive to increase the vaccination rate, with an aim to expeditiously building up a protection shield for Hong Kong. In order to quickly and extensively provide testing and vaccination services in the community, the Government provides the needed services through various service providers and partnering with a number of healthcare organisations.

My consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Luk Chung-hung is as follows:

Virus testing services

For the 2021-22 financial year, the testing service procured by the Food and Health Bureau, including 19 community testing centres (CTCs), mobile specimen collection stations set up in various districts and "restriction-testing declaration" operations, amounts to over 10 million tests. In mid-2021, the Food and Health Bureau allocated the CTCs to nine operators after going through a competitive procurement process. Invitations for quotations were sent to all eligible testing institutions when the CTCs were allocated to nine operators (full list at Annex 1). The nine operators are also responsible for supporting the testing strategy which evolves as required by the latest epidemic situation, by flexibly setting up mobile specimen collection stations and supporting "restriction-testing declaration" operations. The operators are responsible for providing one-stop service from setting up swabbing booths, specimen collection to virus testing.

All operators are in the "Local COVID-19 nucleic acid testing institutions recognised by the Hong Kong SAR Government" list maintained by the Department of Health (DH) and have passed the External Quality Assessment Programme for COVID-19 testing of the DH and possess relevant laboratory accreditation, including:

(i) The private laboratory must possess relevant medical laboratory accreditation, that is, meeting the requirement of quality management standard for medical laboratory accreditation of ISO 15189:2012 or the College of American Pathologists. Recognised private laboratories in general possess accreditation status of the Hong Kong Laboratory Accreditation Scheme (HOKLAS) of the Hong Kong Accreditation Service (HKAS). The accreditation process of medical laboratory is independent and rigorous, which holistically standardises the quality (including standard operating procedures, management systems), personnel qualifications, biosafety, etc. of the private laboratories to ensure compliance with internationally recognised standards; and

(ii) To ensure that the testing platforms and reagents used by private laboratories are up to the standard, they must participate in the monthly Continuous Quality Assessment Programme conducted by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP). Samples including some involving variant strain provided by the CHP are sent to private laboratories regularly, whose results will be evaluated. Contractors who do not meet the standards may be terminated from the contract.

The Government has also taken into account various factors such as the testing capabilities, past experience and performance of the relevant private laboratories when conducting the competitive procurement exercise.

To enhance regulation, the Food and Health Bureau has requested all institutions on the list of "Local COVID-19 nucleic acid testing institutions recognised by the Hong Kong SAR Government" to attain accreditation by HOKLAS

or its Mutual Recognition Arrangement Partners within 2021, with COVID-19 nucleic acid testing included in the scope of accreditation. We consider that the requirement has struck a balance between enhancing the quality of local testing services and ensuring the availability of sufficient testing capacity in Hong Kong to cope with the next wave that could come at any time. The allocation of the next round of CTCs will also be carried out through a competitive procurement process. All private laboratories that meet the accreditation requirement may participate in the bidding.

Vaccination services

The COVID-19 Vaccination Programme led by the Government was launched in February 2021 to provide members of the public with two safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, namely the Sinovac and Comirnaty vaccines. The Government has all along provided multiple channels to encourage members of the public to get vaccinated as early as possible, mainly through operating Community Vaccination Centres (CVCs) and through the networks of private healthcare organisations and private doctors to provide vaccination services to the public.

To mobilise sufficient healthcare manpower to support the smooth operation of CVCs, which had 29 in operation at its peak, the Government partnered with a number of healthcare professional bodies, medical organisations and private hospitals (collectively as partner healthcare organisations thereafter) to take charge of the medical-related tasks at the CVCs, including providing the medical staff to administer the vaccines for members of the public and also handling medical-related tasks, such as dilution of the vaccines (if applicable), providing emergency medical services, explaining medical information and handling of enquiries, as well as the medical support at the vaccination booths and resting areas, etc.

The goal of setting up CVCs is to provide the public with extensive and convenient vaccination services in the community in a safe and effective manner. Hence, the partner healthcare organisations participating in the operation of CVCs need to have a certain scale, healthcare network, experience, mobilisation capability and resources. In early 2021, the Government issued invitation documents to some 40 healthcare organisations which met the above criteria and selected our partner organisations out of them. The factors for consideration included the capability of the organisation concerned to operate the CVC and provide the relevant vaccination services, as well as its experience and resources available for mobilisation, etc. The list of healthcare organisations which operated CVCs in the past/is now operating CVCs is at Annex 2.

On the other hand, around 1 700 private doctors are providing Sinovac vaccination services for members of the public at around 2 500 private clinics under the Vaccination Subsidy Scheme (Note 1), out of which around 160 doctors have also participated in providing the relevant vaccination service at non-clinic setting (i.e. outreach vaccination service). Moreover, 11 private healthcare organisations have joined the BioNTech Vaccination Pilot Scheme (Note 2) and provide the public with the Comirnaty vaccine at 42 service locations. The DH has invited more private healthcare organisations

to participate in the second phase of the Pilot Scheme. Upon completion of the Pilot Scheme, the DH will take into account the experience gained and consider regularising the scheme and implementing it more extensively. On the other hand, residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and nursing homes can invite visiting medical officers who joined the Residential Care Home Vaccination Programme to visit the institution and provide Sinovac vaccination services to the residents (Note 3). To encourage more private healthcare organisations to provide COVID-19 vaccination services, the DH has issued invitation letters to private doctors and arranged seminars for them to explain the details of the relevant programmes and the arrangements for vaccination, etc. For convenient access by doctors, relevant information, such as "Doctors' Guide" and agreements have been uploaded to the "Healthcare Professional Corner" of the thematic website of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme. Also, private doctors can conveniently register to join the Vaccination Subsidy Scheme online.

To ensure the service quality of the healthcare service providers providing vaccination services, the DH requires that they must arrange eligible healthcare workers or staff who have received training to provide the vaccination service to the public. They must also arrange for vaccination in accordance with the relevant agreement and "Doctors' Guide". The DH will also stringently monitor the operations of the healthcare service providers under the various vaccination programmes, and will visit the various vaccination settings from time to time to remind the providers to continue to carefully abide by the guidelines for providing safe and effective vaccination services. Furthermore, the DH has put in place a notification system which requires the responsible doctor to report to the DH any clinical incidents related to vaccination. If there is any contravention of the relevant requirements, the DH will follow up according to the established mechanism.

As regards the protection of labour rights and interests, both service providers and partner healthcare organisations operating CTCs or CVCs have the responsibility to decide on an operation model which complies with the legislation and is suitable for the actual situation. The Government will ensure that the service providers and partner healthcare organisations comply with the relevant legislation in Hong Kong for ensuring that the legitimate rights and interests of the workers are safeguarded.

Note 1:

List of private clinics: www.covidvaccine.gov.hk/en/VSS

List of doctors providing COVID-19 vaccination at non-clinic setting: www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/list_vssdr_covid_non_clinic_eng.pdf

Note 2:

List of private healthcare institutions enrolled in the BioNTech Vaccination Pilot Scheme: www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/list_vssdr_covid_bnt_pilot_eng.pdf

Note 3:

Lists of visiting medical officers: www.covidvaccine.gov.hk/en/RV