

LCQ22: Coronavirus Disease 2019 vaccination programmes

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 27):

Question:

The Government has indicated earlier on that it made advance purchases of three vaccines for protecting against Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) (the vaccines) for administration to all people in Hong Kong for free, and that the vaccination programmes are expected to commence next month at the earliest. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) apart from healthcare workers, the elderly and staff of residential care homes, whether the Government will include the following categories of persons in the priority vaccination groups:

(i) supporting staff in hospitals,

(ii) sample-taking personnel and laboratory staff involved in the COVID-19 virus testing,

(iii) staff of the Hong Kong Fire Services Department responsible for transferring persons under quarantine,

(iv) cleansing workers under the Government's outsourced service contractors,

(v) officers from the disciplined services at immigration control points,

(vi) frontline personnel working in the airport,

(vii) personnel working in quarantine centres,

(viii) practitioners of the transport and logistics sectors, and

(ix) persons exempted from compulsory quarantine;

(2) whether it will include Hong Kong students who need to travel to countries/regions with a medium or high epidemic risk in the priority vaccination groups, with a view to reducing their risks of contracting COVID-19 overseas;

(3) given that the universal vaccination programme in Israel provides round-the-clock vaccination service and deploys vaccination caravans to provide vaccination service in remote areas, which made Israel's vaccination rate reach 15.8 per cent within two weeks, being the highest in the world, whether

the Government will introduce similar arrangements so as to increase the vaccination rate;

(4) as the findings of a survey indicate that quite a number of members of the public have adopted a wait-and-see attitude towards vaccination, whether the Government will consider providing incentives to encourage members of the public to receive vaccination;

(5) given that members of the public may, to a certain extent, choose which vaccine to take, whether it has assessed if there will be a mismatch of demand and supply of the vaccines; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, of the measures in place to ameliorate this problem and how it will handle the surplus vaccines; and

(6) given that the Government will set up an indemnity fund to provide indemnities to members of the public who encounter severe adverse events after the administration of the vaccines, of the details of the fund?

Reply:

President,

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and health experts, COVID-19 would not be eradicated without effective treatment and vaccination. The Government has been adopting a "two-pronged" strategy to procure vaccines for protecting against COVID-19 for the entire Hong Kong population. The Government has on one hand joined the COVAX Facility led by WHO, and at the same time directly entered into advance purchase agreements with individual vaccine developers for obtaining greater supplies of vaccines at an earlier time.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan is as follows:

(1) to (2) The Government's goal is to provide vaccines for the majority of the Hong Kong population within 2021 through vaccination programmes led by the Government. Members of the public can receive the vaccines on a voluntary basis free of charge. Having regard to the views of experts, and depending on the supply of vaccines, suitable groups for application and information on adverse events, etc., we will accord priority for vaccination to groups which have higher risks of coming into contact with the COVID-19 virus (e.g. healthcare workers), groups which have greater mortality rates after contracting the disease (e.g. the elderly, chronic patients), and/or groups which may easily transmit the virus to the vulnerable or weak if infected (e.g. staff of residential care homes). Furthermore, we are reviewing other target groups which may need to receive vaccination early due to their work nature or other needs. Besides the priority groups, we will basically arrange vaccination for citizens according to their age groups, starting with relatively older persons and gradually extending to younger groups. The Government will announce the details of the vaccination programme in due course.

(3) to (5) The Government's goal is to provide vaccines for the majority of the Hong Kong population within 2021 through vaccination programmes led by the Government. Members of the public can receive the vaccines on a voluntary basis free of charge. The Government will be responsible for the distribution of the vaccines. In the process, it will consult the Joint Scientific Committees under the Department of Health as well as expert groups, including reviewing the latest scientific evidence on the epidemiology and clinical features of COVID-19, published clinical data on the COVID-19 vaccines to be procured by the Government and local data, as well as recommendations and practices by overseas health authorities.

In view that the three types of vaccines to be provided by the Government each have different requirements for handling, the vaccination arrangement will be formulated in accordance with the corresponding handling procedures of the relevant vaccine. For example, the vaccine developed by Fosun Pharma in collaboration with BioNTech has more stringent requirements for cold chain management (the vaccines must be stored in -70 degrees Celsius, and can only survive in a two to eight degrees Celsius environment for five days) and also require correct thawing procedures, in order to ensure the quality of the vaccines and that the vaccination procedures adhere to requirements, we will set up Community Vaccination Centres in 18 districts in Hong Kong. Regarding the vaccines provided by Sinovac Biotech (Hong Kong) Limited, and AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford, in view that their storage temperature is similar to that of regular vaccines, we expect that they will be handled following the arrangements for seasonal influenza vaccines in general, under which vaccination will be provided through private hospitals and clinics.

As the vaccines have not yet arrived in Hong Kong for commencement of vaccination, the attitudes of members of the public towards the vaccines are still unknown. We also do not yet have clinical evidence on the need for repeated vaccination on a regular basis. Hence, it is premature to discuss the handling of surplus vaccines at this stage. When implementing the vaccination programme, the Government will adopt a science-based approach. We will do well the work on information dissemination, promotion and education following the principles of openness, transparency, accuracy and timeliness. We will disseminate the benefits and correct information on vaccination, the views of experts and details of the vaccination programme, etc. to members of the public through various channels such as print, electronic and social media, with a view to enabling the public to adequately grasp the relevant information before vaccination, including the principles, formulation, usefulness and side effects, etc. This is to allay the public's concerns, and on this premise, encourage them to get vaccinated. We will also step up monitoring of false information on vaccines within the community and make clarifications and debunk rumours as necessary. We have uploaded relevant information onto the Government's "COVID-19 Thematic Website", and will later set up a thematic website for the vaccination programme, so that members of the public can have access to correct and the most updated information and messages on vaccines from an official channel.

(6) Notwithstanding that the vaccines to soon enter the market have undergone stringent clinical tests to ascertain their safety and that tens of thousands of people have participated in the clinical research, and that the number of people administered with the vaccines in other places continues to increase, it is a matter of fact that the research and development period of COVID-19 vaccines is greatly compressed as compared to other regular vaccines. Hence, the occurrence of rare or unpredictable severe adverse event after widespread vaccination on the population cannot be completely ruled out. Having made reference to overseas practices on the relevant issue, the Government plans to set up an indemnity fund. In the event members of the public encounter a rare or unpredicted severe adverse event associated with the administration of the vaccine, they can still take action against the drug manufacturer. The fund will cover the indemnities ultimately determined by court or arbitration and can provide in advance part of the indemnities in order to make available financial assistance to the member of the public as early as possible. The Government is formulating the relevant mechanism and details and will seek funding approval from the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council as soon as possible.