

LCQ3: Coronavirus Disease 2019 vaccines

Following is a question by the Hon Jeffrey Lam and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (December 2):

Question:

The Government has earmarked over \$8.4 billion in the current financial year for procuring Coronavirus Disease 2019 vaccines (COVID-19 vaccines) and administering them to members of the public. On the other hand, queries concerning the efficacy and safety of vaccination have been raised from time to time in recent years, and such "anti-vaccination" thinking may dampen the public's desire for being administered the COVID-19 vaccines. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the details of the preparatory work for procuring COVID-19 vaccines and administering them to members of the public; whether it will expedite the registration process of COVID-19 vaccines, assist private healthcare institutions in procuring the vaccines, and provide free vaccination for specific groups of persons;

(2) whether persons who have been administered, either in or outside Hong Kong, those COVID-19 vaccines recognised by the World Health Organization will be granted exemption from quarantine requirements upon entry into the territory, so as to facilitate cross-boundary flow of people; and

(3) whether it has set any target vaccination coverage rates for the COVID-19 vaccines; if so, of the measures in place to ensure that the target rates will be achieved; the measures in place to curb the deliberate spread of rumours about the vaccines?

Reply:

President,

My consolidated reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Jeffrey Lam is as follows:

According to the views of the World Health Organization (WHO) and health experts, COVID-19 will not vanish without an effective treatment method and vaccine. The WHO earlier indicated that although we can expect safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines to be available in 2021, the supply of the vaccines is expected to be limited. Relatively large scale administration of the vaccines can only be expected in the latter half of 2021. We also expect that the first batch of vaccines needs to be reserved for high risk groups such as healthcare workers and the elderly, etc. According to information

provided by the WHO, as at 1 December, there were 48 candidate vaccines for protecting against COVID-19 undergoing clinical trials for assessing safety and efficacy. Out of them, 11 had entered phase 3 clinical trial. Although no vaccine has yet obtained approval from regulatory authorities for human application, the Hong Kong SAR Government has adopted a "two-pronged" approach to procure vaccines meeting the criteria of safety, efficacy and quality for the Hong Kong population. The candidate vaccines under consideration include those developed or manufactured in Mainland China and overseas.

Under the "two-pronged" approach, we have on one hand joined the COVAX Facility led by the WHO to procure vaccine doses for 35 per cent of the Hong Kong population as a form of safety net to cater for the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society. On the other hand, we will enter into advance purchase agreements (APAs) with individual vaccine developers with a view to procuring additional supplies. Our goal is to procure at least two candidate vaccines from different vaccine developers and different vaccine platforms under APAs. The doses procured would serve at least twice the Hong Kong population. When entering into APAs, we will make reference to the relevant scientific evidence and clinical data and consult the views of the relevant Scientific Committees under the Department of Health (DH) and expert groups. The safety, efficacy and quality of the vaccines will be the priority factors for consideration in procurement. At the same time, we will also consider the development progress of the vaccines, the technology used and practical circumstances and limits, such as logistics, storage of the vaccines and cold chain management, etc.

While proactively procuring COVID-19 vaccines, the Pharmacy and Poisons Board of Hong Kong and DH will accord priority to applications for registration of the relevant vaccines, with a view to expediting the approval process while ensuring the safety, efficacy and quality of the vaccines. In view that the COVID-19 epidemic is a public health emergency, the Government's priority is to procure and administer vaccines which are safe and effective for our population. Depending on need, we will consider implementing all necessary measures to enable the emergency use of vaccines which have been proven to be safe and effective. At this juncture, we do not rule out the possibility of emergency legislation in times of need.

Administration of vaccines is key to the resumption of normal life for Hong Kong. Having regard to the suggestion of the Scientific Committees, our goal is to provide vaccines for the entire Hong Kong population. Depending on the quantity of vaccines procured, the suitable groups for application and information on adverse events, etc., 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) should be accorded priority in receiving vaccination. The priority groups for vaccination is expected to be around 3 million people. In view that we need to provide vaccination for a large population within a short period of time, we are considering various solutions. We will enable members of the public to

be vaccinated on a voluntary basis and propose to provide the vaccination free of charge. The Government has earmarked \$10 million for promotion and will strengthen publicity and education through various channels. We will also suitably clarify rumours and misinformation so as to increase the public's understanding of the effectiveness and safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

Our understanding is that, as of now, vaccine developers are mainly in direct negotiation with various Governments, with a view to reserving vaccines for them through advance purchase arrangements so as to support large scale vaccination programmes. While we do not rule out inviting private healthcare organisations to participate in the programme to help with vaccination, we do not see the need of helping private healthcare organisations procure vaccines on their own to serve their clients at this stage.

The COVID-19 epidemic is wreaking havoc around the world and vaccine developers are launching clinical trials in various regions at unprecedented speed. With user statistics and immunisation responses of participants of the clinical trials gradually becoming available, we can obtain more information on the safety, efficacy and quality of the various COVID-19 vaccines, including their efficacy across different age groups, effective period, dosage, time between each doses, and adverse reactions, etc. The Government will closely monitor the development of COVID-19 vaccines and the epidemic situation in Hong Kong and around the world. At the same time, we will make reference to relevant guidelines promulgated by the WHO. Upon consolidating the relevant information and with regards to the anti-epidemic strategy of the Hong Kong SAR Government, we will holistically consider and formulate the vaccination programme. Details of the programme will be announced in due course.

Thank you, President.