

## LCQ4: Heat Stress at Work Warning

Following is a question by the Hon Tony Tse and a reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (July 5):

Question:

On the second of last month, the Labour Department issued the Heat Stress at Work Warning (the Warning) three times in accordance with the Guidance Notes on Prevention of Heat Stroke at Work (the Guidance Notes), with the intervals between the cancellation and reissuance of the Warning being just 10 minutes and 20 minutes respectively. It has been reported that some affected employers and employees were at a loss as to what to do. Besides, some trade unions and trade associations of the construction industry have indicated that owing to the nature of work, works contracts, terms of employment of employees, etc of the construction industry, it is difficult to effectively implement the Guidance Notes' recommendation that employees should suspend work intermittently when the Warning is in force. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has conducted a review on the respective times at which, according to the Guidance Notes' recommendation, the relevant employees in the construction industry should rest and return to work on the three occasions when the Warning was in force on the second of last month; if so, whether it has assessed if the relevant arrangements are sensible and practicable; and

(2) as some members of different sectors have relayed that there are huge discrepancies between the recommendations set out in the Guidance Notes and those put forward by the authorities during consultation, whether the authorities will, having regard to the problems arising from the implementation of the Guidance Notes and the views of various sectors, comprehensively review the contents and scope of implementation of the Guidance Notes as early as possible, including exploring with the sectors alternatives to the arrangement of intermittent suspension of work?

Reply:

President,

The Chief Executive announced in the Policy Address last year that the Government would develop guidelines based on the Hong Kong Heat Index (HKHI) to require employers to take preventive measures in accordance with prescribed criteria to protect employees from heat stroke at work. The Labour Department (LD) launched the Guidance Notes on Prevention of Heat Stroke at Work (Guidance Notes) and established the Heat Stress at Work Warning based on HKHI in mid-May this year with a view to facilitating employers and employees to adopt, so far as reasonably practicable and in a risk-based approach, appropriate measures to reduce the risk of employees suffering from

heat stroke at work.

My reply to the Member's question is as follows:

The main purpose of the LD in issuing the Guidance Notes is to remind employers and employees to attend to the hazards of heat stress and to take corresponding preventive measures to reduce the risk of heat stroke. In general, heat stress at work is influenced by various risk factors as associated with the work environment, work nature and employees' personal health condition. The LD encourages employers to conduct prior heat stress risk assessment with reference to the Guidance Notes and formulate necessary heat stroke preventive measures for employees at work, including appropriate rest time arrangements. When the Heat Stress at Work Warning is in effect, employers can then take relevant preventive actions in a prompt and orderly manner. It must be pointed out that resting is one of the feasible means to cool down the body for preventing heat stroke. If employers take other appropriate heat stroke preventive measures, such as setting up effective shading facilities at working locations or providing equipment to enhance heat dissipation, the rest time under Heat Stress at Work Warning as mentioned in the appendix of the Guidance Notes can be suitably reduced. In other words, taking appropriate heat stroke preventive measures does not only reduce the risk of heat stroke among employees but also minimise the impact on work flow and progress.

In actual practice, the Heat Stress at Work Warning will be in effect for at least one hour once issued, and the work rest arrangements recommended in the Guidance Notes are also devised on hourly basis. Although it is technically possible for a warning to be reissued shortly after its cancellation because of a rise in HKHI again, this would not affect the feasibility of implementing the hourly-based heat stroke preventive measures during the effective period of the warning. The Heat Stress at Work Warning is a newly launched warning system. The LD will carefully monitor various situations arising from this new system and work with the Hong Kong Observatory to explore any room and means to optimise the system.

The LD had consulted the Labour Advisory Board on the framework and main content of the Guidance Notes prior to its issuance. Consultation documents had also been sent to over 3 000 occupational safety and health practitioners in Hong Kong, as well as relevant policy bureaux/government departments, inviting them to provide feedback. In addition, the LD had organised three consultation sessions and two meetings during the consultation period and invited attendance of representatives from about 100 relevant stakeholders (including employers and employees organisations, interest groups, and professional organisations). The LD also introduced the main content of the new Guidance Notes at the meeting of the Panel on Manpower of the Legislative Council in February this year. Overall, the vast majority of respondents did not raise objection to the LD's launching of the Guidance Notes, and views had been exchanged with the LD on various implementation details and future directions. The LD had also suitably adjusted some of the proposed measures in response to the feedback received.

The LD has maintained liaison with the construction industry all along and has, for matters related to the Guidance Notes, established communication channels with stakeholders in the industry through the Construction Industry Council and relevant trade and labour unions. The intention is to assist the stakeholders to formulate heat stroke preventive measures suitable for the industry to lower the risk of heat stroke among employees working under hot weather. Over the past two months, the LD has introduced the content of the new Guidance Notes to employers, employees and relevant stakeholders through occupational health public talks, as well as meetings and outreach presentations held with stakeholders (including the Construction Industry Council, the Occupational Safety and Health Council, and various trade/labour unions). As of June 18, the LD had held about 50 related talks. We notice that the LD and the construction industry share the same goal in safeguarding employees against heat stroke at work. We will assist the industry to make reference to the recommendations in the Guidance Notes, enhance publicity among the employees and develop appropriate measures to reduce their risk of heat stroke.

As the Guidance Notes are newly introduced, the LD will continue to work with the Occupational Safety and Health Council, the Construction Industry Council and other stakeholders to strengthen relevant promotion and publicity work. We are committed to assisting the industry in applying the recommendations in the Guidance Notes flexibly to develop appropriate heat stroke preventive measures. We believe that the majority of employers will co-operate and take appropriate measures to safeguard their employees' occupational health. We will carefully observe and collect relevant data and conduct review in due course.