

LCQ4: Variants of the coronavirus

Following is a question by the Hon Jimmy Ng and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 27):

Question:

The World Health Organization has reported that variants of the coronavirus causing the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) have been found in Denmark, the United Kingdom, South Africa and Japan one after another, with some of such variants having higher transmissibility. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that some virus variants have higher transmissibility, whether the Government will implement more stringent measures to prevent the importation of cases;

(2) whether it has reviewed if the various COVID-19 vaccines that it has procured or planned to procure are effective in preventing the virus variants from causing diseases, and reviewed the performance of the various tests in detecting the virus variants; and

(3) given the unsatisfactory vaccination rates of most of the countries which have commenced COVID-19 vaccination, whether the Government has put in place concrete measures for spurring the majority of members of the public to receive vaccination voluntarily; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Jimmy Ng is as follows:

(1) As the global epidemic situation is still raging, with the more transmissible new virus variants spreading in some overseas places, the Government must stay vigilant and has imposed stringent prevention and control measures to avert the importation of cases.

We cannot drop our guard considering the higher transmissibility of the new virus variants. Noting the prevalence of the new virus variants in certain places, the Government had, in late December last year and mid-January this year, made the relevant specifications under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H) to restrict persons who have stayed in Brazil, Ireland, South Africa and the United Kingdom for more than two hours on the day of boarding or during the 21 days before that day from boarding flights

for Hong Kong.

Meanwhile, according to the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO), the incubation period of the virus can be as long as 14 days. Although there was no current evidence indicating that the incubation period of the new virus variant can be longer, with reference to advice from experts that the incubation period of virus carried by very few infected persons can be longer than 14 days, coupled with the rapid and drastic change of the global pandemic situation, the Government had at the end of last year amended the Compulsory Quarantine of Certain Persons Arriving at Hong Kong Regulation (Cap. 599C), the Compulsory Quarantine of Persons Arriving at Hong Kong from Foreign Places Regulation (Cap. 599E) and Cap. 599H as a precautionary measure. This allows the Government to, having regard to the extent and pattern of the spread of diseases in a certain place and the public health risk posed to Hong Kong by the relevant persons arriving at Hong Kong, provide for the flexibility, based on anti-epidemic needs, in lengthening the compulsory quarantine period for persons arriving at Hong Kong from a certain place, and the period for a certain foreign place in which persons who arrive at Hong Kong have stayed before the arrival for determining the quarantine and boarding requirements. We have specified under the relevant amended regulations published in the Gazette to require that from December 25, 2020, all persons arriving at Hong Kong who have stayed in places outside China on the day of arrival at Hong Kong or during the 21 days before that day to undergo compulsory quarantine for 21 days in designated quarantine hotels, so as to ensure that no case will slip through the net even under very exceptional cases where the incubation period of the virus was longer than 14 days.

The Government will continue to closely monitor the situation, including the development of the epidemic situation both globally and locally and the changes in the volume of cross-boundary passenger traffic, and will implement even more decisive measures as and when necessary to prevent the importation of the virus into the Hong Kong community.

(2) and (3) In terms of testing, the Public Health Laboratory Services Branch under the Centre for Health Protection of the Department of Health is currently using the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) nucleic acid test to conduct and process COVID-19 testing. The reagent used is not affected by the genetic transformation of the virus' S protein.

In terms of vaccines, the vaccines advance purchased by the Government are respectively the inactivated virus vaccine by Sinovac Biotech (Hong Kong) Limited, the nucleic acid vaccine by Fosun Pharma/German drug developer BioNTech, and the viral vector vaccine by AstraZeneca/University of Oxford. Our goal is to procure at least one vaccine from each vaccine technology platform. This means we will purchase four different vaccines, with the aggregate number of doses sufficient to serve at least two times the population of Hong Kong. This is to diversify risks and ensure sufficient supplies of safe and efficacious vaccines for the whole of Hong Kong.

To ensure that the vaccines fulfil the requirements of safety, efficacy

and quality, the clinical data, overseas authorisation obtained, and other information relevant to the safety, efficacy and quality of COVID-19 vaccines used in Hong Kong must be reviewed by the Advisory Panel on COVID-19 Vaccines established under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Use of Vaccines) Regulation (Cap. 599K) (the Regulation). Before authorising a vaccine, the Secretary for Food and Health will take into account the expert advice of the Advisory Panel. The Government will ensure that vaccines satisfy the requirements of safety, efficacy and quality, and obtain emergency use approval in accordance with the relevant requirements as well as stringent approval procedures under the Regulation, before arranging for members of the public to receive the vaccines. With user statistics and immunisation responses of the vaccine clinical trials gradually becoming available, we can obtain more information on the safety, efficacy and quality of the various types of COVID-19 vaccines. 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 and continuously monitor the safety and efficacy of the vaccines.

As the administration of vaccines will be a territory-wide programme, we will do well in the work on information dissemination, promotion and education. When implementing the vaccination programme, we will adopt a science-based approach. 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. We will also step up monitoring of false information on vaccines within the community and make timely clarifications as necessary. We will later set up a thematic website for the vaccination programme, so that members of the public can have access to the most updated information and messages from an official channel.

Thank you, President.