

LCQ6: Anti-epidemic measures

Following is a question by the Hon Alice Mak and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (January 20):

Question:

Some members of the public have criticised that since the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic, the anti-epidemic measures promulgated by the Government from time to time were of a great variety, with some of them even taking effect within a short period of time. As such, the general public failed to keep abreast of such measures and act accordingly. On the contrary, the Government of the United Kingdom (UK) has put in place a four-tiered alert system for the COVID-19 epidemic and stipulated the anti-epidemic measures that the public and society must take under each tier of alert. For instance, when Tier 4 alert comes into force, the public are not allowed to go out unless necessary, all non-essential retail outlets must close, etc. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will, by following the practice of the UK Government, put in place a tiered alert system for the COVID-19 epidemic and stipulate the anti-epidemic measures that members of the public must take when different tiers of alert come into force; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(2) of the current maximum total number of COVID-19 tests that can be conducted daily by public and private laboratories; whether it has assessed if Hong Kong currently has enough testing capacity to implement universal compulsory testing; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the negative, whether it has plans to increase the testing capacity and the number of specimen collection points; and

(3) given that the Government issues compulsory testing notices from time to time to require persons who were present on specified premises during specified periods to undergo COVID-19 tests, whether the Government will draw up clear guidelines and criteria for the relevant arrangements and improve the dissemination of information, so as to facilitate members of the public to understand in a more convenient and quicker manner (i) whether they are persons subject to compulsory testing, and (ii) the ways for undergoing testing; if so, of the details?

Reply:

President,

Hong Kong has been extensively affected by COVID-19, a pandemic sweeping across the world. In view of the unstable situation of the epidemic, we should not let our guard down. Recently, there is a resurgence of confirmed

cases or clusters of infection without a known source in the community. The epidemic is on the brink of another wave of outbreak. It is therefore essential for us to take all necessary measures to strengthen epidemic control by guarding against the importation of cases and the resurgence of domestic infections, and to further enhance the precision of the control measures to be taken in a bid to achieve the target of "zero infection" with the support and cooperation of the general public.

In consultation with the Home Affairs Bureau, my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Alice Mak is as follows:

(1) The Government launched the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance (the Plan) on January 4, 2020. The Plan sets out the Government's preparedness and response plan in case of an outbreak of COVID-19 so that different government departments and organisations can respond according to the agreed and coordinated efforts with an aim to reducing the mortality and morbidity of the Hong Kong population due to novel infection. Furthermore, the Plan also serves as a tool for clear communication of the level of risk with the public. The Plan includes three response levels – Alert, Serious and Emergency. These response levels are based on risk assessment of COVID-19 that may affect Hong Kong and may be activated based on its health impact on the community.

On January 25, 2020, the Government raised the response level to the highest level of Emergency.

The Government will assess the risk from time to time in view of the latest scientific evidence and development, activate or deactivate the response level and implement corresponding anti-epidemic measures.

(2) We have been implementing anti-epidemic measures such as virus testing, contact tracing and social distancing in accordance with the principle of "early identification, early isolation and early treatment", with a view to preventing the spread of the virus in the community. The World Health Organization (WHO) and health experts around the globe have pointed out that COVID-19 will not vanish without an effective treatment method and vaccine. In fact, even if we start vaccination this year, the vaccine will not be able to completely prevent the spread of the virus in a short period of time. Therefore, our current virus testing strategy is to continue and expand compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted testing on an obligatory basis and testing on a voluntary basis. As such, specified persons of high risk are required to undergo compulsory testing on a mandatory basis, targeted groups are arranged to undergo testing on an obligatory basis, and we also encourage members of the public to undergo voluntary testing to achieve voluntary testing on a large scale.

To tie in with the above strategy, the Government has been stepping up surveillance and testing efforts in a multi-pronged approach. The current maximum daily testing capacity of public and private laboratories has been substantially increased to approximately 100 000 tests per day (without sample pooling). Through various channels of specimen collection, the

Government can collect samples from a maximum of about 80 000 members of the public for testing each day.

On whether universal compulsory testing should be conducted, if it were to be effectively implemented, it must be complemented by comprehensive lockdown. It is questionable whether local citizens and businesses are willing to accept a comprehensive lockdown; and even so, the supply of daily necessities is another issue. We are of the view that the present precision-guided anti-epidemic measures which focus primarily on compulsory testing for people of high-risk groups, complemented by broadened and more convenient voluntary testing for the public, constitute a more appropriate strategy.

(3) Since the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J) came into operation on November 15, 2020, the Government has exercised the power under the regulation multiple times to issue compulsory testing notices with a view to fully implementing the virus testing strategy of compulsory testing on a mandatory basis. This includes requiring persons who had been to specified premises (including dance clubs/venues, restaurants, residential buildings, construction sites, department store and hospitals); symptomatic persons; staff members of residential care homes for the elderly, residential care homes for persons with disabilities and nursing homes, day service units attached to the premises of residential care homes; and taxi drivers to undergo compulsory testing.

In order to cut the transmission chain in the community as soon as possible, the Government has also actively expanded the coverage of compulsory testing on a mandatory basis especially for residential buildings to achieve community clearing. With effect from December 30, 2020, if there are two or more units in a building with confirmed cases in the past 14 days and the units concerned are not epidemiologically linked to each other, the building would be included in the compulsory testing notice under Cap. 599J and persons who had been present at that building for more than two hours in the past 14 days are required to undergo compulsory testing.

To facilitate persons covered under the compulsory testing notices to undergo testing, the Government not only provides free testing services in 19 community testing centres, but also arranges testing service providers to set up mobile specimen collection stations in the vicinity of these buildings to provide free and convenient testing services for them. Persons subject to compulsory testing can also choose to undergo free COVID-19 testing through other channels, which include obtaining a deep throat saliva specimen collection pack from any of the 188 distribution points (i.e. 47 designated general outpatient clinics of the Hospital Authority, 121 post offices, and vending machines at 20 MTR stations), and return the specimen to one of the designated specimen collection points. The Government will announce information on compulsory testing notices, including the categories of persons subject to compulsory testing and testing channels, through press releases and upload the information onto the "COVID-19 Thematic Website": www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/compulsory-testing.html and www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/early-testing.html.

In addition, District Offices have maintained close contact with local residents in different areas of respective districts and provided them with relevant information and appropriate assistance on how to comply with the compulsory testing notices and undergo testing via different routes before the testing deadline. After the issue of compulsory testing notices, District Offices will contact testing contractors to help them set up mobile specimen collection stations at appropriate locations. District Offices will first distribute notices to affected households and display notices in the public areas of the buildings to remind them to visit the mobile specimen collection stations or nearby testing facilities to undergo testing within the specified period. District Offices will also set up counters at mobile specimen collection stations and/or the main entrance of buildings to register residents who have undergone or will undergo compulsory testing, and contact and urge those who have not yet registered to undergo testing as soon as possible. If necessary, with the assistance of the Housing Department, the Hong Kong Housing Society, relevant Owners' Corporations or property management companies, District Offices will conduct home visits to urge residents not yet tested to undergo testing as soon as possible, and contact the Department of Health or the Social Welfare Department to provide appropriate assistance to persons with special needs (such as the elderly and disabled persons with poor health or walking difficulties).