

LCQ6: Coronavirus disease 2019 vaccines

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

Question:

From the commencement of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme on 26 February this year to the middle of last month, only about 1.2 million members of the public in Hong Kong received the first dose of the vaccines, accounting for less than 20 per cent of the population aged 16 or above in Hong Kong, and such a vaccination rate was far below the level needed to achieve herd immunity. Some members of the public have indicated that while the Government has appealed to the public from time to time to receive vaccination, they are worried about the side effects of the vaccines and have no confidence in government policies at all, and therefore they have still adopted a wait-and-see attitude. It has been reported that the Governments of the Mainland and many countries have encouraged their nationals to receive vaccination through a wide variety of preferential policies and measures, such as reducing property tax, giving away tickets of ball game matches and food, and holding grand draws. On the contrary, the SAR Government has not offered any incentive in this regard so far. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as it has been reported that a nasal vaccine, currently being researched and developed by the University of Hong Kong (HKU) with relatively less side effects, is not expected to be available for use in Hong Kong until three years from now, whether the Government has gained an understanding of the reasons for the need for such a long time (including the difficulties faced);

(2) as it is learnt that HKU has commenced phase 1 clinical trial of the nasal vaccine and the preliminary results have shown that the vaccine has not caused serious adverse effects, whether the Government will render appropriate manpower or financial assistance to HKU, in order that the research and development of the vaccine can be completed expeditiously and the vaccine can be used in Hong Kong to provide the public with an additional choice of vaccine; and

(3) whether it will, by following the practices of the Governments of the Mainland and many countries as well as local commercial organisations, offer incentives to encourage members of the public to receive vaccination, such as tax relief measures as well as handing out cash, travel tickets and admission tickets for cultural and leisure facilities?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Paul Tse is as follows:

(1) & (2) Research and development to market use of a new vaccine typically takes five to ten years. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, drug manufacturers around the world have raced against time and pooled together resources to develop vaccines, with a view to compressing the development timeline for effective vaccines on the premise that safety and quality are ensured. Currently, there are around 10 COVID-19 vaccines being used in large scale around the world, including eight vaccines listed for emergency use by the World Health Organization (WHO) (note). Furthermore, according to information by the WHO, there are more than 100 types of COVID-19 candidate vaccines worldwide still in clinical development stage, and there are nearly 200 of them still in pre-clinical development stage. From time to time, there are drug manufacturers which announce the halting of the development of their candidate vaccines for various reasons.

The Department of Microbiology of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) have partnered with Xiamen University and Beijing Wantai Biopharmaceutical Company to develop a nasal spray COVID-19 vaccine ("VectorFlu™ ONE"). The development of this vaccine has received funding of around \$20 million from the Health and Medical Research Fund (the Fund) under the Food and Health Bureau to support the first phase safety clinical trial so as to evaluate the safety and immunogenicity of the vaccine. Before the vaccine can be authorised formally for emergency use, it needs to pass various tests, including conducting first to third phase clinical trials and obtaining the relevant certification, in order to ensure the safety and efficacy of the vaccine.

The successful development of a vaccine hinges upon various circumstantial factors. As far as the above nasal spray vaccine is concerned, if the third phase clinical trial is to commence, the research team needs to recruit at least 10 000 volunteers as research participants. The trial also needs to be conducted in places where there is continuous transmission of SARS-CoV-2. As the population size of Hong Kong is small and the epidemic situation is very mild, we cannot fully support clinical trials of such scale. Hence, the research team needs to recruit research participants from outside of Hong Kong. According to our understanding of HKU's current arrangement, the research team will first recruit around 100 voluntary research participants in Hong Kong, 30 of whom have started the first part of the trial. The second part will commence in July 2021.

There are currently no manufacturers of vaccines in Hong Kong. Based on our understanding, the research team has commissioned a company in Mainland China to produce the nasal spray vaccine which has undergone the first phase safety clinical trial in Hong Kong. Last year, the Government rendered support to the HKU research team in its application for a permit to enable cross-province and cross-boundary transport of vaccines. The development process of a drug is often confronted by different challenges and uncertainties. The Government has all along welcomed vaccine development in

Hong Kong. The Fund will also provide additional resources in a timely manner to support local research and development so as to tie in with the Government's anti-epidemic efforts.

(3) Since the start of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, about 2.4 million doses of vaccines had been administered and about 1.37 million of them were the first dose, accounting for 21 per cent of the population aged 16 or above in Hong Kong. To further encourage members of the public to get vaccinated as soon as possible, the Government and different sectors in the community will roll out various measures and reward programmes.

Facilitating vaccination

From June 1 to August 31, government employees will be entitled to a day of vaccination leave for each vaccination dose received. Moreover, all government employees who were vaccinated on or before May 31 will be allowed to apply for one day of authorised absence for each dose already received. The Government appeals to statutory bodies/public organisations, as well as employers of enterprises, to encourage their staff to get vaccinated, and to arrange vaccination leave or other facilitation measures for them.

Facilitating gatherings

The Government will further relax social distancing measures with the vaccine bubble concept as the basis, including relaxation of the maximum number of persons allowed at premises and group gatherings, the maximum capacity of premises and operation hours, the types of activities allowed, the distance among groups, and the mask-wearing requirement. Among them, the Government is considering allowing vaccinated persons to bring children and elderly persons who are not vaccinated to dine together at Type D catering businesses, and raising the number of persons allowed to be seated at the same table in bars/pubs, clubs/nightclubs and karaoke establishments.

Vaccination in lieu of regular testing

The vaccination in lieu of regular testing approach is being implemented for front-line government employees to safeguard their health. Front-line employees who have received the first dose of a vaccine and provided their vaccination record could be exempted from regular testing.

Vaccination promotion activities

The Government welcomes the incentives actively provided by the commercial sector and organisations to encourage members of the public to receive the COVID-19 vaccines. We understand that the commercial sector and many organisations are considering to organise lucky draw activities for this. In order to facilitate their applications for the relevant licence(s),

the Government will provide consultation services for licence applications, and will expedite the processing of the relevant applications.

The fourth wave of the local epidemic has basically come to an end. However, the community must stay vigilant amid the current situation and prepare well for a possible fifth wave of the epidemic that could strike at any time. The fifth wave of the epidemic will probably hit with higher transmissibility and more serious infectious mutant strains. The two vaccines provided by the Government fulfil the criteria of safety, efficacy and quality. Only through the "Early Vaccination for All" campaign can Hong Kong build a barrier for protection with no delay.

Thank you, President.

Note: WHO has listed the Pfizer/BioNTech, AstraZeneca-SK Bio, Serum Institute of India, Astra Zeneca EU, Janssen, Moderna, Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines for emergency use.