

LCQ6: Testing and quarantine arrangements amid the epidemic

Following is a question by Dr the Hon David Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (February 23):

Question:

The fifth wave of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic is severe. It has been reported that some members of the public who obtain positive test results have waited on their premises for many days and yet have not been sent to hospitals for isolation. Moreover, there have been confirmed elderly and child patients who develop severe symptoms and pass away one after another. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has formulated specific measures to ensure that persons undergoing "StayHomeSafe" will comply with the relevant quarantine requirements, and that they will not increase the risks of their family members living with them as well as members of the public in nearby communities contracting the disease; if so, of the details;
- (2) of the further measures in place to shorten the waiting time for members of the public to undergo testing at community testing centres;
- (3) whether it has formulated clear guidelines on daily care for confirmed patients stranded in the community; if so, of the details;
- (4) whether it will further increase the number of isolation facilities; if so, of the details; and
- (5) whether it will set a time limit for sending members of the public who have obtained positive results from nucleic acid tests to isolation facilities?

Reply:

President,

The current epidemic situation in Hong Kong is of grave concern. It is the worst situation in the two years since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic. Since the beginning of the fifth wave of the epidemic last December, the Government has swiftly launched a series of anti-epidemic measures and continued the implementation to handle the situation.

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

(1) In view of the serious epidemic situation at present, the Government launched the "StayHomeSafe" Scheme on February 8, 2022 in order to curb the spread of COVID-19, safeguard people's health and protect the healthcare system from collapse. The Department of Health (DH) carries out assessments for persons who need to undergo quarantine, including the suitability of the person's dwelling place for quarantine, the risk level of persons confining at the same place, and their individual physical conditions, in arranging close contacts and household contacts of close contacts who are deemed appropriate after assessment to undergo home quarantine for 14 days and four days respectively.

Persons undergoing home quarantine must stay in their dwelling place and wear an electronic wristband throughout the quarantine period. They need to regularly monitor their physical condition including taking body temperature twice daily; conduct regular Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) on their own on specified dates (close contacts must also attend the Community Testing Centre (CTC) for testing on Day 12); and follow other home quarantine guidelines issued by the DH, including infection control measures on receipt of delivery items, disposal of garbage, cleaning and disinfection of home environment, etc. Any other person (including friends or relatives not living together) should not enter the place of quarantine.

Government personnel monitors whether persons undergoing home quarantine stay in their dwelling place during the quarantine period by means of electronic wristband, making phone calls and conducting spot checks, and more. Besides, the DH requires relevant persons to take a photo immediately after reading the RAT result, and keep the SMS notifications containing the result of the test at CTC for inspections when requested by Government personnel. Any person who leaves the dwelling place without permission or fails to comply with the testing requirements commits an offence and would be liable to a fine of \$10,000 and \$25,000 respectively, as well as imprisonment for six months.

Furthermore, the DH has drawn up infection control advice and arranged briefing sessions on the "StayHomeSafe" Scheme for property management and courier sectors to minimise their risk of being infected. Details of the "StayHomeSafe" Scheme and related guidelines have been uploaded onto the Government's designated webpage (www.coronavirus.gov.hk/eng/home-quarantine.html) for public reference.

(2) As the COVID-19 situation in Hong Kong has become more severe recently, the need for testing has also increased drastically. To improve queue management at CTCs and mobile testing stations, the Government has implemented a series of enhancement measures at the moment, including:

(i) Request testing contractors to set up special queues and accord priority to persons in need, e.g. the elderly, pregnant women, people with disabilities or limited mobility so as to shorten their waiting time to take a test;

(ii) Mobilise a number of civil servants from various government departments

to provide short-term on-site assistance at testing stations in different districts, such as assisting in registration, crowd management, maintaining order and handling enquiries;

(iii) Set up ticket kiosks at testing stations gradually, so that members of the public can take tickets first and then return to the CTCs/mobile testing stations at a later time, without having to wait in long queues. They can also scan the QR code on the ticket to check queuing status, and visit the Community Testing Centre website (www.communitytest.gov.hk) to check the real-time queuing status of the relevant testing stations.

(3) The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the DH has published and uploaded the points to note for persons tested positive / preliminarily positive for COVID-19 testing, as well as the health advice for persons pending admission to hospitals or isolation facilities to the Government's "COVID-19 Thematic Website".

Apart from the above information announced by the CHP, the Hospital Authority (HA) Patient Support Call Centre has commenced services on February 9, 2022 to provide telephone support service to further support on the healthcare needs of persons who are pending admission to hospitals or isolation facilities. Nurses will proactively contact persons confirmed with COVID-19 who are pending admission to isolation facilities and conduct health assessment, provide healthcare related information and psychological support, as well as send them reminders to maintain personal and household hygiene. In addition, the HA has commenced operation of a telephone hotline on February 15, 2022 to answer enquiries on medical information and provide infection control advice for persons pending admission to isolation facilities upon confirmed infection. The hotline 1836 115 operates daily from 8am to 10pm for seven days a week. The HA has also activated seven designated clinics on February 16, 2022 to help provide diagnosis and treatment for persons pending admission to hospitals or isolation facilities and presenting with mild symptoms of infection. In order to implement appropriate infection control arrangements, people seeking consultation must make appointments by telephone. The healthcare staff of the designated clinics will provide appropriate treatment according to the patient's clinical condition, and will transfer the patient to hospital for further treatment if required. The HA will closely monitor the service needs and operation of the telephone hotline and the designated clinics to dovetail with the latest developments of the epidemic and the Government's anti-epidemic measures.

(4) The Government is making every effort to construct community isolation facilities (CIFs) to receive persons who are tested positive but display no or mild symptoms. It is expected that the number of units can be increased from around 5 000 at present to around 12 000 within February, with the provisions in Penny's Bay CIF, Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village, the three blocks of unoccupied public housing estates and CIF hotels. We anticipate that there will be 16 000 additional units mainly coming from other CIF hotels and conversion of Kai Tak Cruise Terminal within March.

In addition, the Government has commenced the construction of CIFs at

the sites of Penny's Bay and near Kai Tak Cruise Terminal for completion in phases in the coming few months, providing around 10 000 units. The Government has also earmarked other five sites, which can provide at least 20 000 additional units based on preliminary estimation.

(5) The recent epidemic situation in Hong Kong has been very severe. Despite a significant increase in handling capacities on various fronts earlier, the fifth wave involves the Omicron mutant strain with an extreme transmission speed. A tsunami of new cases has far exceeded the enhanced capacities of Hong Kong on various fronts including testing, tracing, quarantine, isolation and treatment. Hospital Accident and Emergency Departments, wards and community treatment facilities under the HA are facing immense pressure, and cannot admit all cases tested preliminarily positive or confirmed for COVID-19. It is necessary to prioritise the handling and care of patients with higher risks and more serious conditions. At the same time, CIFs of the Government are not yet adequate to enable immediate transfer of all persons with no or mild symptoms from home to these isolation facilities for centralised isolation. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government is striving to further enhance its handling capacities by making the best use of the support rendered by the Central Government, including significantly increasing community isolation and treatment facilities with a view to isolating and treating confirmed cases as early as possible.