

LCQ6: Vaccination against the Coronavirus Disease 2019

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 5):

Question:

With the continuous rise in the number of people vaccinated against the Coronavirus Disease 2019 globally, the governments of various places have introduced "vaccine passports" one after another, with a view to resuming cross-border travel and restarting the economy. Regarding vaccination, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it has considered introducing vaccine passports when the local vaccination rate has reached a specified level, and discussing with the governments of various places mutual recognition of vaccine passports to exempt travellers who have been vaccinated from entry quarantine; if so, of the details;
- (2) given the emergence of local confirmed cases recently involving virus variants, whether it has studied the efficacy of the two vaccines currently provided by the Government in preventing infections with virus variants; of the progress of its study on the procurement of second-generation vaccines; and
- (3) given that many members of the public are still hesitant towards vaccination, what new measures the Government has put in place to encourage members of the public to receive vaccination?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan Hak-kan is as follows:

- (1) As of yesterday, more than 1.1 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine have been administered worldwide, equal to 15 doses for every 100 people. With vaccination programmes being implemented in different places, and gradual publishing of clinical user statistics as well as immunisation responses, we can obtain more information on the efficacy and quality of various COVID-19 vaccines. The SAR Government has been closely monitoring the vaccination certification, recognition and verification arrangements of individual places, countries and economies, and have been considering vaccination as a criteria to reduce quarantine. Arrangements regarding "vaccination passport" requires discussions between the governments of different places, and factors

such as epidemic development, health control and prevention measures, and vaccination progress of the relevant places, etc. will be taken into consideration.

As vaccination rates around the world are rapidly increasing, we note that some places are considering or have announced the reduction or lifting of quarantine for vaccinated persons. The SAR Government has also announced that considering that the epidemic situation in certain places have stabilised and pose lower public health risks, with reference to the "vaccine bubble" concept, it will adjust the quarantine arrangements for persons who have stayed in overseas places other than extremely high-risk and very high-risk places. The basic boarding and quarantine requirements will remain unchanged for high-risk and medium-risk places (i.e. Group B and Group C specified places), but the Government will supplement in due course new arrangements applicable to fully vaccinated persons and shorten the compulsory quarantine period for the relevant persons from 21 days to 14 days under the "vaccine bubble" concept. As for low-risk Group D specified places (i.e. Singapore, Australia and New Zealand), the compulsory quarantine period for fully vaccinated persons will also be correspondingly shortened from 14 days to seven days in due course under the "vaccine bubble" concept. Persons who have completed quarantine under the adjusted Group B, Group C and Group D requirements will be required to self-monitor for seven days and undergo compulsory testing after their shortened quarantine.

The SAR Government is now implementing the vaccination programme at full speed. A higher vaccination rate will give us better leverage to negotiate with other places the arrangements for resumption of cross-boundary travel.

(2) There were several mutant variant strains circulating globally, including the variants that first emerged in the United Kingdom (B.1.1.7), in South Africa (B.1.351) and in Brazil (P.1). In general, studies have shown that the existing vaccines works well against the non-variant, and the effectiveness data against variants differ by vaccines. With regards to the two types of COVID-19 vaccines provided in Hong Kong, the BioNTech vaccine is effective against B.1.1.7 and P.1, but is less effective against B.1.351. For the Sinovac vaccine, the drug manufacturer concerned is currently implementing a large scale study in Brazil and more efficacy data against variants will be available. Regarding the first local case of infection with unknown source involving a mutant virus strain, the two authorised vaccines in Hong Kong are still effective in vitro testing against the two mutant viruses detected in the relevant case. In view of the higher transmissibility of mutant strains, we urge the public to get vaccinated without delay.

The quantity of vaccines procured by the Government and to be supplied this year is sufficient for meeting our goal to provide vaccines for the majority of the population within this year. On the other hand, we have started to consider procuring the next generation COVID-19 vaccines, with a view to planning for the next phase of vaccination programme in Hong Kong. We hope that the next generation vaccines can have better efficacy in terms of protection. The protection power of the vaccines against mutant virus strains is also an important factor for us when considering to authorise and procure

COVID-19 vaccines in the future. Although we cannot predict with certainty when the next generation vaccines will be available, we have started to discuss with vaccine manufacturers from various places to provide Hong Kong with the next generation vaccine with stronger protection powers against mutant virus strains, with a view to supporting our next phase of the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

(3) The Government has adjusted various social distancing measures with "vaccine bubble" as the basis. In respect of catering business, we have provided four types of mode of operation for eateries, under which the operation restrictions on the relevant premises would be relaxed subject to whether their staff and customers have received COVID-19 vaccination and the use of the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application. Moreover, six types of premises (viz. bars or pubs, bathhouses, party rooms, clubs or nightclubs, karaoke establishments and mahjong-tin kau premises) may also resume operation in a gradual manner on the premise that their staff and/or customers must receive COVID-19 vaccination and customers must use the "LeaveHomeSafe" mobile application. We have also relaxed the restrictions in relation to group gatherings, including wedding ceremonies, religious gatherings and business meetings held in order to comply with any Ordinance or other regulatory instrument such as annual general meetings on the premise that their participants must have received at least the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine. Group gatherings of not more than 30 persons each during tours may also resume operation on the premise that their frontline staff must have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine.

The Government will closely monitor the progress of the vaccination programme and the implementation of the "vaccine bubble", and having regard to the development of the epidemic, timely adjust the relevant measures.

Thank you, President.