

LCQ7: Government's anti-epidemic preparedness and response plan

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Siu-hung and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 4):

Question:

Paragraph 27 of the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance (the Response Plan) published by the Government in January 2020 sets out that: "All relevant Government bureaux and departments are advised to draw up contingency plans in response to novel infection to ensure coordinated responses and essential services in the Government and in major business sectors. All relevant bureaux and departments should also periodically conduct exercises and revise related contingency plans. The Department of Health will maintain close networking with private hospitals, professional medical organisations and other non-governmental organisations to mobilise community resources when needed". In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether the Food and Health Bureau, the Department of Health (DH) and its Centre for Health Protection have regularly conducted drills and revised their contingency plans since publication of the Response Plan; if so, of the details;

(2) of the details of the DH's networking and communications with private hospitals and professional medical organisations since publication of the Response Plan, and whether the DH has discussed with them how public and private hospitals should co-operate in combating an epidemic upon activation of the Emergency Response Level under the Response Plan (if the DH has, of the details); and

(3) as it has been reported that the fifth wave of the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic broke out in January this year, but it was not until early March that some private hospitals began to admit this kind of patients, and the arrangements were only interim measures, whether the Government has enhanced the regular co-operation mechanism between public and private hospitals under the Response Plan, so that upon activation of the Emergency Response Level, private hospitals will be able to share the work of public hospitals more effectively and tackle the crisis jointly; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to Hong Kong's healthcare

system. The healthcare profession from both the public and private sectors have taken on the responsibility to fight against the epidemic with a view to safeguarding the public's health. With the full co-operation of various sectors in society, the fifth wave of the epidemic has gradually stabilised, enabling us to adjust various restrictive measures in phases from late April as planned to get society back to normal in an orderly manner. Although the epidemic situation continues to stabilise, we will steadfastly take forward the strategies of guarding against the importation of cases and the resurgence of domestic infections to achieve the greatest anti-epidemic effect.

In consultation with the Hospital Authority (HA), my reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Chan is as follows:

(1) To enhance the overall preparedness and response for communicable diseases with public health significance, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has developed contingency plans and conducted drills to test the capability of relevant government departments and relevant organisations in coping with possible major outbreaks of infectious diseases and public health emergencies, as well as to enhance the awareness and the capability of the community and healthcare personnel. Since the promulgation of the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance (the Plan) on January 4, 2020, the HKSAR Government has from time to time adjusted and prepared response arrangement through reviewing anti-epidemic measures and conducting drills. For example, in response to the gradual resumption of face-to-face classes in all schools from April 19, 2022, apart from issuing guidelines to schools and taking additional measures (including the compulsory requirement of conducting rapid antigen tests daily by teaching staff and students), the Department of Health (DH), the HA and the Education Bureau conducted drills before the resumption of face-to-face classes in mid-April 2022 to prepare for any outbreaks in schools. In addition, the Centre for Health Protection of the DH, together with the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department and the Centre for Food Safety of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, participated in the annual International Health Regulations Exercise Crystal organised by the World Health Organization's Regional Office for the Western Pacific in December 2021. The simulated scenario of the exercise involved a new virus having been detected with pandemic potential against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic ongoing around the world. The experience gained from these exercises enhanced communications among relevant parties and strengthened their capability to adjust and map out more targeted and refined strategies and measures (including the arrangements under the Plan).

(2) and (3) According to the Plan announced by the Government in 2020, the HA will take contingency measures in the provision of medical services such as reducing non-urgent and non-emergency services where necessary and discussing with private hospitals on patients' transfer/diversion. Details of the contingency measures are as follows:

The HA has timely adjusted its non-emergency and non-essential medical

services in response to the different stages of development of the COVID-19 epidemic since early 2020. To tie in with such service adjustments, the HA has expanded the service scope of some of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) programmes, including the expansion of the service group of the Project on Enhancing Radiological Investigation Services through Collaboration with the Private Sector to cover all eligible cancer patients, increasing the service quota of the Haemodialysis PPP Programme, as well as extending the Colon Assessment PPP Programme to cover colonoscopy cases delayed due to the epidemic. Furthermore, the HA has launched emergency PPP Programmes to deliver services such as orthopaedic surgery, cystoscopy, gastroscopy and breast cancer surgery, so that affected patients can be treated as early as possible.

Since the outbreak of the fifth wave of the epidemic in late December 2021, there is an upsurge in the demand for public hospital beds. Apart from further increasing the service quotas of the various PPP programmes, the HA has also re-activated some of the emergency PPP programmes, such as the Oesophago-gastro-duodenoscopy Collaboration Programme. To address the demand for hospital beds, the HA has specifically referred its patients to private hospitals for treatment through the low-charge bed mechanism established with two private hospitals and a new partnership programme with private hospitals implemented with the help of the Government.

Besides, the HA has established a Tele-health Hub where about 50 private doctors or retired doctors participating in a locum scheme take turns to provide services. The Hub is operated seven days a week to render support to confirmed COVID-19 patients who are undergoing isolation in the community and to provide infection control guidelines and tele-health advice for help seekers and their family. The Government has also commissioned the HA to undergo strategic purchasing with private healthcare institutions in order to provide medical support for users at community isolation facilities.

In view of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government met with representatives from private hospitals on March 8, 2022 and appealed to the private hospitals in supporting the anti-epidemic efforts. Apart from providing more hospital beds for receiving patients referred by the HA, private hospitals were suggested to offer medical support to COVID-19 patients through various means (including participating in the operation of holding centres for the elderly, providing outpatient or telemedicine services for COVID-19 patients etc.) in order to alleviate the immense pressure faced by public hospitals.

Moreover, a meeting was held on March 9, 2022 with representatives of the medical and health sector, including healthcare professional bodies, via video conferencing to enlist their all out efforts in mobilising healthcare professionals within a short period of time to support the government's various epidemic containment measures. Currently, about 780 healthcare professionals have signed up to take part in various anti-epidemic work, which includes providing medical support to community isolation facilities, joining the HA's anti-epidemic team and assisting in speeding up COVID-19 vaccination.

In view of the phased resumption of face-to-face classes in primary and secondary schools as well as kindergartens from late April, a meeting with representatives of the medical and health sector from various healthcare professional bodies, medical organisations and medical institutions was held again on April 14 to appeal to the private healthcare sector to continue to unite in the fight against the epidemic and help treat COVID-19 patients, so as to cope with the possible rebound in the number of COVID 19 confirmed cases after the resumption of face-to-face classes.

Although the current fifth wave of the epidemic is on the wane, the Government and the HA will keep staying on guard and proactively prepare for the possible outbreak of the next wave by drawing reference from the experience gained in the fifth wave. Leveraging on the experience of the previous co-operation with the private healthcare sector, as well as the platform built on active communication, the HA, having regard to the development of the epidemic, can make appropriate adjustments to the various PPP programmes, consider enhancing or extending the regularised PPP programmes, re-activate programmes which have been completed, or even introduce new PPP initiatives.