

LCQ9: Mobilising healthcare resources of the Mainland and Hong Kong to fight the epidemic

Following is a question by the Hon Yim Kong and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 6):

Question:

The number of persons confirmed to have contracted the Coronavirus Disease 2019 in Hong Kong hit the record high time and again in recent months, making the healthcare system severely overloaded. Recently, the State President has given important instructions on Hong Kong's work of fighting the epidemic, including that the Hong Kong SAR Government should mobilise all available manpower and resources, and that the various relevant Central Authorities and local authorities should render their full support to the Hong Kong SAR Government for it to accomplish the work of fighting the epidemic. It is learnt that the authorities and quite a number of enterprises on the Mainland have responded actively, and have planned to mobilise Mainland healthcare resources at various levels to help Hong Kong fight the epidemic, including offering Hong Kong people voluntary services such as free online diagnoses and treatments by appointment through a "State-owned Enterprises' Telehealth Platform" with which over 400 doctors from major Mainland hospitals have signed contracts. In addition, some Mainland enterprises and individuals have donated anti-epidemic proprietary Chinese medicines (pCms) to Hong Kong people. In respect of mobilising available healthcare resources of the Mainland and Hong Kong to fight the epidemic, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has, in view of the emergency situation of the epidemic, exempted the aforesaid healthcare platform and its Mainland doctors from the relevant statutory requirements in respect of licensing and registration for a specified period, so as to enable Mainland healthcare professionals to help Hong Kong fight the epidemic expeditiously; if so, whether it has, at the same time, exempted the Mainland-registered medicines prescribed by such doctors and provided by Mainland hospitals to Hong Kong patients from the relevant registration, and arranged a "green lane" for the speedy delivery of such medicines to Hong Kong patients; if it has not granted the relevant exemptions, of the reasons for that, and the measures put in place to mobilise Mainland healthcare resources to help Hong Kong fight the epidemic;

(2) whether it has, in view of the emergency situation of the epidemic, exempted the Mainland-registered pCms donated by the aforesaid Mainland enterprises and individuals from registration, so as to enable such pCms to be distributed to Hong Kong people for free; if not, whether it has issued clear guidelines to prevent Mainland enterprises and individuals from donating pCms which are not permitted to be used in Hong Kong; and

(3) as it has been reported that the authorities have recently mobilised private doctors in Hong Kong to provide remote diagnostic and treatment services to members of the public, of the specific plan for this; whether it has, at the same time, mobilised the registered Chinese medicine practitioners across the territory to provide such services; if not, of the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Central Government has been providing staunch support to the anti-epidemic work of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). Since the Mainland-Hong Kong thematic meeting on COVID-19 epidemic held on February 12, 2022 in Shenzhen, the personnel and forces supporting Hong Kong have arrived or started within a short period of time. The HKSAR Government has mobilised all available manpower to cope with the fifth wave of the epidemic. The Chief Secretary for Administration is coordinating five task forces in drawing up and taking forward concrete measures, reporting to the Chief Executive thereon and holding thematic meeting with the Mainland authorities from time to time for coordination and follow-up, so as to leverage the Central Authorities' guidance based on their experience in fighting the epidemic, as well as their manpower and resource support to tackle the epidemic situation.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Yim Kong is as follows:

(1) In response to the emergency situation and public danger brought about by the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Chief Executive in Council approved on February 23, 2022 that the Emergency (Exemption from Statutory Requirements) (COVID-19) Regulation (the Regulation) be made pursuant to the Emergency Regulations Ordinance (Chapter 241), with a view to allowing the Government to exempt certain persons or projects from all relevant statutory requirements in respect of licensing, registration and application, etc., such that the HKSAR Government may draw on Mainland's support and resources in a flexible and prompt manner to undertake key anti-epidemic projects at full speed when necessary, so as to increase Hong Kong's epidemic control capacity for containing the fifth wave within a short period of time.

The Regulation empowers the Chief Secretary for Administration to, for preventing, protecting against, delaying or otherwise controlling the incidence or transmission of the specified disease or treating patients with the specified disease, having regard to the factors set out in the Regulation, grant an exemption in writing to persons or projects such that they do not have to comply with certain requirements under enactments (including a requirement for licence, authority, approval, exemption, permit, registration, standard or specification).

Since commencement of operation of the Regulation, the Chief Secretary for Administration has exercised his power to exempt Mainland medical support personnel who have come to Hong Kong from the relevant legal requirements on

registration, etc. This provides comprehensive legal protection for their participation in the treatment of patients in Hong Kong. As regards Mainland doctors providing online medical services to Hong Kong residents through the telemedicine platform, since they have not come to Hong Kong to treat patients, no application for exemption from statutory registration is required.

As for medicines, in view of the earlier demand for medicine containing paracetamol for use as analgesics and antipyretics, the HKSAR Government has procured these medicines from the Mainland via the task force of ensuring medical supplies, under the co-ordination of the Central Government. The relevant medicines are being distributed to confirmed patients at home via anti-epidemic kits. Moreover, the Hospital Authority (HA) has also procured the relevant medicines from the Mainland via such mechanism for patient use.

(2) The HKSAR Government expresses its heartfelt gratitude to the Central People's Government for its donation and support to the HKSAR Government's mass procurement of three types of anti-epidemic proprietary Chinese medicines (pCms), namely "Lianhua Qingwen Jiaonang", "Jinhua Qinggan Keli" and "Huoxiang Zhengqi Pian/Jiaonang", to support Hong Kong's fight against the fifth wave of the epidemic and address the strong demand for anti-epidemic pCms in the community. The relevant pCms are distributed to the general public and people in need for free through various channels to jointly make good use of Chinese medicine (CM) to fight the epidemic. The HKSAR Government will also include pCm in the anti-epidemic service bags to be distributed to all households in Hong Kong.

At present, the HKSAR Government has made special arrangement for the anti-epidemic pCms supplied by the Central People's Government such that no registration under local legislation is needed, having regard to the assured source and quality of these pCms. To protect public health, members of the public should purchase or obtain anti-epidemic pCms from reputable and reliable merchants and organisations to avoid mistakenly purchasing or consuming pCms of unknown sources.

(3) The Secretary for Food and Health conducted a meeting with representatives of the medical and health sector from various healthcare professional bodies, medical and nursing schools of tertiary institutions, medical organisations, healthcare institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on March 9, 2022 to enlist their all out efforts in mobilising healthcare professionals to support the Government's various epidemic containment measures, which include, among others, provision of telemedicine services for COVID-19 patients. The Government is pleased to note that some private hospitals and medical groups had already launched telemedicine support services for members of the public and COVID-19 patients, and will continue to encourage more private hospitals, medical groups, healthcare professionals and NGOs to provide free telemedicine services to members of the public (including COVID-19 patients).

On the other hand, during the fight against the fifth wave of the epidemic, CM has been deeply involved in the whole process of epidemic prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, giving full play to the strengths

and functions of CM. Considering that the resources of Hong Kong's CM sector are mainly concentrated in the private market, the Secretary for Food and Health, together with the HA, met with the representatives of the CM sector in mid-February 2022 to discuss the participation of the CM sector on the epidemic prevention, control and treatment efforts. The CM sector has responded positively to the appeal, and immediately mobilised manpower and resources of the sector to launch various CM telemedicine services targeting different beneficiaries, and arrange delivery of medicines to the patients where feasible.

Furthermore, the Food and Health Bureau, through the Chinese Medicine Development Fund, launched a special support scheme (titled "Fight the Virus Together – Chinese Medicine Telemedicine Scheme") to subsidise CM practitioners to provide free CM telemedicine services as well as dispensing and delivery of CM drug to relevant patients, enabling the CM sector to be fully engaged in the anti-epidemic work and to fully mobilise the resources of Hong Kong's CM sector which are concentrated in the private market. The first phase of the scheme is expected to benefit 20 000 patients. The scheme is coordinated by the Federation of the Hong Kong Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Chinese Medicines Traders Association, and has been open to registration by patients since March 22, 2022.