

Remarks on seasonal influenza and dental services by S for Health

Following are the remarks made by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, at a media session after attending a radio programme this morning (January 11):

Reporter: Why there is a public naming of more than 160 schools for refusing to join a what is meant-to-be voluntary on-campus vaccination programme? How would you address the challenges raised by the education sector? Also, can you talk about the room for improvement for the online public dental services, even after the introduction of the over-subscription mechanism?

Secretary for Health: The outreach vaccination programme for schools has been very successful. The percentage of schools from kindergarten to secondary schools that participated has significantly increased, because we are offering this to every school free-of-charge, and with facilitation such as including the nasal vaccines especially for young kids. In the past six months, when we were preparing for the flu season, the Department of Health has repeatedly reminded every schools to join the programme. And in fact, this is not the first time that we provide a list of the schools that have not joined the outreach programme. We actually listed out all the schools in November last year for the first time. It is the fact which I think should be available to the public, especially our concerns for the parents. If the parents are not aware that their schools are not offering the programme, they would not be aware of the fact that they would need to bring their kids to private clinics, or whatever facilities, to arrange vaccinations for their own kid(s), so this is very important that I do think that we have the responsibility to inform the public, especially the parents. I do feel that it is not a matter of affecting the reputation of certain schools, I think this is the fact. I think we all have the same mission – that is to protect our kids, especially in this winter influenza season. Vaccinations are the most protective way in preventing serious flu complications, including hospital admission and even deaths.

We have to remind everyone that in the year of 2024, with a very long flu season, 35 kids who suffered from severe flu complications had to be hospitalised. And among these 35, six kids died, and we did not want this to happen. But unfortunately, while we have stepped into 2025 for just 11 days, and the flu season has just started, we have already had one kid, a four-year-old kid who had not received influenza vaccination while the school has not offered the outreach vaccination programme, suffered severe flu complications; and has now been hospitalised in the Intensive Care Unit. We do not want any further serious flu cases to happen. This kid has been healthy all along. Everyone in Hong Kong certainly has the duty and obligation to protect our young kids. This is not the time to discuss whether particular schools should be on the list, the fact is that they haven't offered outreach programme. They have different reasons, but this is not our

issue of concern. We are concerned how many kids have not received the vaccines, and we have the duty to protect them.

For the public dental services, the dental online registration system has been rolled out. I am glad that, especially today when we have temperature close to 10 degrees, we have not seen our elderly lining up outside the clinics and facing this cold weather, waiting in the queues for a long time just to get an appointment in the clinic. We now have the online registration system. We provide every method for these elderly even if they do not have a cellphone, and they do not know how to use online booking, they can easily go to the clinics and we have staff at the door front to help them make the appointments. It is just a few minutes that they can have the appointments booked.

I have to emphasise that the dental clinics are just for emergency services for those who have acute infection or pain, who needs pain relief or tooth extraction. This is certainly not the ultimate goal. We want to have more prevention, rather than cure or treatment. We are born with our denture. If we protect it well, it should be able to last long. We hope that at the age of 80, our elderly would still be able to retain their denture of at least 20 teeth, that would save a lot of our resources in providing treatment for them. We are putting more emphasis in prevention, including our existing student dental care programme, we want to extend it from primary school forward to kindergarten students and secondary school students as well, so we will be rolling out these programmes hopefully within this year. Thank you.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the remarks.)