

Speech by SCS at LSCM Logistics Summit 2021 (English only)

Following is the speech entitled "Strategy and Planning in Combatting COVID-19 in Hong Kong" by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip, at the Logistics and Supply Chain MultiTech R&D Centre (LSCM) Logistics Summit 2021 this morning (September 10):

Alfred (Secretary for Innovation and Technology, Mr Alfred Sit), Alan (Chairman of the Board of Directors of the LSCM, Dr Alan Lam), Simon (Chief Executive Officer of the LSCM, Mr Simon Wong), government colleagues, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

I am delighted to have this opportunity to join you for this year's LSCM Logistics Summit.

I might add "rare" opportunity, because it is unusual for a Secretary for the Civil Service to be invited to speak at a Logistics Summit about a public health issue.

I understand that you have been looking forward so much to this year's Summit. Not only because the Summit itself has been a remarkable signature event of the industry over the years, but also because the Summit this year can finally be convened in a combination of physical and online forms.

We are living in unusual times, and if there is one thing that I have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic it is this – we need to work together to defeat the virus. The fact that this year's Logistics Summit is held in-person here at Hong Kong Science Park, as well as in cyberspace, is another indication that we are adapting to a "new normal" way of life and working together to combat the virus. No doubt the knowledge-sharing among the Summit's speakers and participants around the world will help to maintain the momentum in our joint efforts to resume normal economic and social activity.

I believe you would agree that so many of us can meet here today indicates that we have so far successfully managed the COVID-19 pandemic in Hong Kong. Our strategy in the fight against the virus has been, from the outset, guided by facts and science and implemented as swiftly and as transparently as possible. The key measures to combat COVID-19 include immigration control, quarantine and isolation, social distancing, virus testing, contact tracing and vaccination. Innovations and advances in technology have helped in each step of the way. I am personally involved in a number of these measures as our colleagues looking after health policy understandably have too much on their plates. I am delighted to have this opportunity to share with you some experiences on how we have reached where we are today, and how logistics and technology played a vital part in our

combat against COVID-19.

Although logistics and anti-epidemic work may apparently seem remote, in many cases good logistics support is the prerequisite of the latter. Let me share with you two stories on logistics, one is the Universal Community Testing Programme, or UCTP for short, and the other the government COVID-19 Vaccination Programme.

The UCTP was launched this time last year. In the first two weeks of September 2020, we invited all members of the public to be tested using combined nasal and throat swabs. It was during the time when the third wave of the epidemic was on the declining path. Once the decision to launch the programme was made, the testing programme had to be implemented as soon as possible as we had to act quickly to get the COVID-19 situation back under control – we only had two weeks to get ourselves ready and to roll out the programme.

Thanks to many government colleagues, including the Innovation and Technology Bureau, the OGCI0 and many others, and outside parties, an online booking system and more than 140 community testing centres were set up across the territory at very short notice. The manpower logistics alone were challenging: some 6 000 healthcare personnel, 4 000 serving and retiring civil servants and 2 000 supporting staff were recruited to support the UCTP. They helped in the operation of the testing centres, information and technology, logistics, safety management and the 24-hour hotline.

Among the many moving parts, let me use the humble testing bottles as an example of the logistical challenges. While testing bottles may look fairly plain, they need to be properly imported and stored upon arrival in Hong Kong; delivered to the testing centres, not just at any time but at the appropriate time; paired with the right person; collected and tracked after specimens were taken; and finally delivered to the laboratory. All these involved forecasts of inventory and delivery, real-time tracking of each and every bottle, and the digitalisation of such information depended on a reliable and sophisticated logistics chain.

With the unfailing support of our logistics partners, most notably LSCM, we completed the testing of more than 1.78 million people during the two-week period.

Apart from the immediate effect of identifying more than 40 positive cases, and halting the potential spreading chains in the community, the UCTP was a key milestone in our anti-epidemic work. It achieved very positive effects in the longer term –

(a) We built up a much higher virus testing capacity and enhanced our capability to conduct virus testing, especially when there is a rapid surge of cases;

(b) The general population is now much more receptive to virus testing and aware of the importance of early identification of COVID-19 cases.

(c) It has paved the way for the subsequent introduction of other anti-epidemic measures, including the three-tier testing strategy, comprising compulsory testing, targeted testing and voluntary testing; and the "restriction-testing declaration" or RTD. Under RTD, residents within a specified "restricted area" are required to stay in their premises, usually overnight, and undergo compulsory testing until all have done so and the test results have been ascertained.

Soon after we have successfully concluded the Universal Community Testing Programme, another challenge, as well as opportunity, was then presented – the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme.

We firmly believe that large-scale vaccination is the best way, perhaps the only way, to defeat the pandemic. Our vaccination programme formally started on February 26, 2021, and has lasted for more than six months now. As of yesterday, we have already administered 8 million doses; 4.3 million people have received their first jab. Judging from the latest trend, particularly on the declining trend, we anticipate that 70 per cent of our eligible population – those aged 12 or above – will have received at least one dose by next month.

Hong Kong is fortunate to have stable and sufficient supplies of vaccines to support our vaccination programme. People have a choice of two vaccines, Sinovac or BioNTech. Members of the public can receive free shots through various channels, including 29 Community Vaccination Centres, over 1 000 private clinics, and more than 1 000 residential care homes. In addition, we have conducted outreach vaccination services to workplaces, theme parks, shopping malls, elderly centres, schools and the local community. Our objective is to boost the vaccination rate by making it easier and more convenient for people to receive the jabs, particularly the elderly.

The success of our vaccination programme hinges on reliable and effective logistics. The supply chain readiness is key to efficiently deploying COVID-19 vaccines to the population across all delivery channels. This is particularly the case for the BioNTech vaccine, which must be stored at special facilities at minus 70 degrees Celsius. At the same time, COVID-19 vaccines are scarce and have a short shelf life, so cold chain equipment, temperature monitoring, vaccine distribution, inventory management and monitoring mechanisms need to be particularly rigorous and efficient.

With the assistance again from our partner LSCM, we have deployed solutions underpinned by the latest technology. We have made good use of real-time inventory management systems, with special features such as secured point-to-point electronic lock and instant stock-tracking functions to monitor the lot number, the expiry time and usage of every single vaccine vial.

The systems have enabled us to ensure the traceability of COVID-19 vaccines in dispensing and dilution processes, to meet the stringent quality-control requirements of the vaccines. It safeguards the stock in storage and

during the distribution and reduces wastage of the precious vaccines. The information is not only useful in ensuring the integrity of the vaccine in the supply chain, it also enables us to capture essential data to provide useful management statistics and information. We can predict and constantly monitor the stock level as well as the local ultra-cold chain capacity, including surge capacity, to deploy vaccine supplies and respond quickly to any gaps in supply. A smooth and trusted vaccination process also gives people extra peace of mind when they are considering whether to have the jab.

I have highlighted how logistics has played an essential role in our testing and vaccination programmes, areas where my colleagues and I are directly involved.

Hong Kong has worked hard to contain the spread of COVID-19, achieving a "zero infection" rate for a period of time, but we are not out of the woods yet. The emergence of new virus mutant variants and an uneven global recovery from the pandemic continue to cause concern. Experiences of other places remind us all that the tide can change quickly, in a matter of days. We therefore cannot let our guard down. We will make use of the current narrow window of the "zero infection" situation in Hong Kong to shore up our defences. We have to build double barriers against COVID-19. That is, building a strong wall to prevent the importation of cases and a protective shield for the community through vaccination.

To build the double barriers, we have revamped and streamlined the risk profiling of overseas places, and we continuously monitor and revise the travel, testing and quarantine arrangements for people travelling to Hong Kong to plug any loopholes. We understand that maintaining a 21-day quarantine period for Hong Kong people returning from designated "high risk" places is very tough and inconvenient. At the same time, I hope we appreciate that the stringent measures have successfully suppressed the virus and prevented a rebound in Hong Kong, despite the resurgence and the widespread transmission of the delta variant globally. As a matter of fact, in just the past two weeks we have identified 70 imported cases, preventing a potentially devastating chain of infection in the community. You could imagine the chain of infection if these cases were leaked into the community.

As for the building of a protective shield for the community through vaccination, we appreciate that at present about 64 per cent of the eligible population have taken their first jab in response to our call for early vaccination. I have to say that given the very low infection rate in Hong Kong and the unique characteristics of our society, it is by no means easy nor could we take it for granted for us to reach where we are today in terms of the vaccination rate. That said, our weakest link is the low vaccination rate among the elderly population. So far only 27 per cent of elderly aged 70 or above, and 13 per cent of those aged 80 or above, have taken their first jab; less than 10 per cent of the residents of elderly homes have received the first dose of the vaccination. We cannot underestimate the risks to the elderly population should there be a new wave of infection. The elderly are the most vulnerable to COVID-19, as they have a higher risk of severe illness or even death if they become infected. Therefore, in the coming days and

months, we will invest resources to reach out to the elderly through district networks, and to appeal to them and their family members to act and encourage their relatives to get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Ladies and gentlemen, the pandemic has presented us, and the whole world, with serious challenges to our society and economy. Overcoming these challenges will require a constant stream of new ideas, technology and solutions. Working closely with logistics partners to implement testing and vaccination programmes in Hong Kong has been a very rewarding experience for me and my colleagues. I am confident that industry experts, such as your goodselves, will continue to explore new and innovative solutions, not just to combat COVID-19, but also to gear up for the "new normal" post-pandemic economy.

Finally, I thank Alan and Simon for inviting me to share my experience with you this morning. I wish the Logistics Summit great success, and every one of you a most enjoyable and fruitful day.

Thank you.