

Transcript of remarks by CE at media session before ExCo (with video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam at a media session before the Executive Council meeting today (March 23):

Reporter: Is the Government seeking to start vaccination for those under 30 years old? The second question is, how concerned are you that the 21-day quarantine in face of vaccinations will put Hong Kong behind other regional financial centres such as Singapore? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Thank you for the two questions concerning the Hong Kong SAR Government's work in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. First of all, as I have said on several occasions, Hong Kong is actually very fortunate as far as vaccination is concerned. When many places all over the world are scrambling for vaccines, we have a pretty assured supply of vaccines for the people of Hong Kong. At the moment we have authorised two vaccines for use, that is the Sinovac as well as the BioNTech, and we have advance purchase agreement with a third vaccine. We have over 2.3 million doses which are already in place in Hong Kong. In order to make full use of the available vaccines and to enable Hong Kong people to be vaccinated as soon as possible, you will notice that we have been adjusting the eligibility of people who could come forward for a vaccine. We started off like many places with what we called the "priority groups", that is the healthcare workers, the elderly and so on. Then we expanded it to another set of priority groups like foreign domestic helpers and so on. At the third stage we open it up for anybody regardless of their profession, to anybody aged 30 and above. All these eligible groups now already account for 5.5 million of the Hong Kong population out of a total of 6.5 million because at the moment we are not applying the vaccine to those under 16 based on the experts' advice and also what we are seeing in other places. The only so-called "omission", if I may put it that way, is those under 30 who do not belong to the priority groups, say, about 1 million. I notice that the Secretary for the Civil Service, Patrick Nip, who has been put in charge of this vaccination programme, has already hinted that we will closely monitor the situation. If there are more vaccines available, if another batch from Sinovac is coming, or from BioNTech is coming, then the Government will be willing to open up to everybody. In fact, opening up to everybody aged 16 and above makes the whole thing much simpler. You just come in with your ID card, make a booking and then you'll be vaccinated. I can say that we will continuously look into this and try to open up when circumstances permit.

For the 21-day quarantine that Hong Kong has imposed on arrivals from outside China is, I would confess, very stringent. At the same time the fact is we continue to have positive cases confirmed beyond the 14th day while in quarantine. Maybe when they took a second test during quarantine on day 19, then there was a confirmed case. I think up to now there could be about 10 or

so such confirmed cases, which get our public health officials quite worried – if these confirmed cases are allowed to go home after day 14, but then later on they are discovered to be a positive case. I certainly am fully and acutely aware of the pressure that this has put on a lot of people, not only just business travellers but a lot of people. To be isolated for 21 days is a huge load in terms of physical, psychological and other aspects. I would say that I would personally look into this matter and see whether we could find mitigating factors to reduce or to bring back the 21 days to the norm of 14 days which are adopted in many other places. At the same time we could assure the public health officials that there are safeguards in place to ensure that if people leave the quarantine centre or hotel earlier than 21 days, there are certain safeguards or medical surveillance in place to ensure that they will not bring infection into the community. I certainly realise that since the latter half of November, now almost four months, with all these very stringent measures, it does give us the relief in terms of the cases coming down very significantly, but we would need to also take into account the interests, the benefits and the needs of other people.

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