

Transcript of remarks by SCS, SFH and DoH at media session

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip; the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; and the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan, on the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme at a media session this afternoon (April 1):

Reporter: From day one, the Government has said there is no reason to suggest there is any safety or quality issue to the vaccine, so why it has taken 12 days to restart this programme, why do the risks outweigh the benefits in this case? Do you ever consider overruling the manufacturer and the agent, and restarting the programme on public health grounds? Secondly, if Hong Kong needs to suspend the vaccination once more, say you find more packaging defects, non-safety issues, are there any contingency plans in place now so that we will not need to halt the entire vaccination programme for longer than a week once again?

Director of Health: We have all along taken report of abnormalities related to vaccination very seriously, so whenever we receive report from the frontline healthcare providers we will report it through the local agent to the manufacturer, and in this case, Germany BioNTech. The company also took the matter very seriously and I think it is a very responsible attitude to make sure the investigation reviewed and confirmed no safety or quality issues before the vaccine is administered. So in this case, the company has advised to withhold the vaccination of the batch 210102 and, as a precautionary measure, also withhold the use of the batch 210104.

Upon further investigation, samples being detected in Hong Kong were sent back to Germany for investigation and they have done numerous tests and experiments on the vials concerned. They also did tests in another finish-and-fill plant operated by Baxter and in the process they found out that in the vials packed at the site which provided batches 210102 and 210104, there were issues related to the so-called crimping process. Crimping is the process by which pressure is applied to the aluminum ring which fixed the rubber stopper at the top of the vial. We received report that it is related to the process of crimping and at the same time the condition of ultra-low temperature of -70 degrees. That is why BioNTech now decided to send the new vials from Baxter which have undergone repeated experiments and investigation and that would exclude further occurrence of such events.

On the question why we did not overrule the manufacturer's recommendation, I think it would not be correct to overrule the manufacturer's recommendation because, in any case, it is the manufacturer who possesses the in-depth knowledge on the manufacturing process. We would rely on the manufacturer to conduct a thorough investigation and submit the full report to us, and upon scrutiny of the complete investigation report we will decide what to do. So I think it is important and it is a prudent

approach to follow the manufacturer's recommendation to suspend the use of the concerned batches.

Secretary for Food and Health: I think the most important thing, as the Director of Health has said, is safety. The important thing is we have a robust mechanism to identify these problems. When these problems are identified, like this time that it is us who identified these packaging problems and reported to the manufacturer, we would then rely on the manufacturer to do the investigation. We are working very closely together with them. But a robust system is the most important. We will continue to monitor the situation.

Secretary for the Civil Service: As regards your second question concerning the supply of vaccine, we have purchased two types of vaccines with an agreement to supply a total of 15 million doses, sufficient to cover the whole population. That's the assurance. We will continue to monitor the situation to ensure that we have sufficient supply of vaccines. With that and also with the choice of vaccines, that's why we urge the public to take these opportunities to have early vaccination.

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