

Transcript of remarks by SFH at media session (with video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, at a media session this afternoon (February 16) on the latest social distancing measures:

Reporter: Professor Chan, is the Government bowing to public pressure by relaxing social distancing rules, for health officials and experts have been warning of a rebound in cases after the Lunar New Year? There are already 20 preliminary positive cases today, just the day after the holiday. Are you going to be tightening measures if we see a rebound immediately after 14 days?

Second question is, why are staff of businesses being reopened given an extra week to get tested instead of having a negative test ready before the reopening on Thursday? Is this sort of a loophole that can increase the risk of transmission?

Third, what are the preconditions for the next phases of relaxation? Do cases need to be in the single or a low double digit in the next two weeks? When can schools fully resume operation? Thank you.

Secretary for Food and Health: Your last question is about schools? School resumption, is it?

Reporter: It's kind of two. The preconditions for the next phase of relaxation, like bars and stuff, and when can schools fully resume? Thank you.

Secretary for Food and Health: First of all, if we review the current epidemic situation, we have been seeing a decline in the number of confirmed cases. There is a low double digit in the past while. There is a single digit on unlinked cases, so we are also seeing a decline. If we look at the RT figure (real-time effective reproductive number), published by the University of Hong Kong, School of Public Health, again, it is below 1. It is about 0.6. All these different data, including our sewage study which shows a number of negative results in various districts. Therefore, if we are looking at the number of cases every day and also the entire situation, we felt that this is time that we are able to gradually relax some, not all, but some of the scheduled premises and also the catering dine-in business in the evening.

Of course, we will continue to monitor the situation day by day, with all these different parameters that I have just highlighted. As the Chief Executive has earlier said that with the low double digit number (of cases), we might be able to reopen some of the premises and also to resume not only the economic activity, but also to resume people's livelihood. So we think this is the time. But of course, with the reopening or with the relaxation, we are also very very careful about a few things. First of all is that we

want to ensure the risks of contracting the disease in these premises are put down to a very low level. Therefore, we have given out two requirements. First is to have all the staff tested every 14 days. This is actually similar to our target group testing, but this time this is required by law, that we require the restaurant owners or managers to be responsible, to ensure their staff in their restaurants or in these premises are tested every 14 days. Second is to use the "LeaveHomeSafe" app (application) so that it is easier for people to keep a record of places where they go to. It is like a diary. Secondly, if there are confirmed cases in the premises that they went to, then they would be informed so that they would take care of their own health situation.

On top of this, different premises would probably have other requirements in terms of infection control measures. Relevant bureaux and also departments would be working with the trade in terms of highlighting those additional requirements to them.

Give the catering business for example. We want to require them to make sure that the air change is at a satisfactory level so that the risk of infection would be reduced. We understand that this may take a little bit of time. Therefore, we will be putting in the directions at a later stage to allow some grace period for them to make sure, to ensure that they have these air change, either to get an additional air purifier, or to work on their own air conditioning system.

These are some of the examples that we will be putting on. Of course, for the other premises, relevant bureaux will be issuing press releases so that you will find their requirements in more details.

Secondly, your question about the staff. Why give them an additional week? In fact, if we look at the reopening of all these premises, by the 18th, there will a very large number of people going to get the test before. We want to give them a period of time for testing. That is the same as other requirements of compulsory testing, for example, for taxi drivers or residential homes' staff. This is actually similar arrangement and we felt that this is fine with the current arrangement.

As far as the next phase of relaxation is concerned, I think we have to be very very careful because we are closely monitoring at least two areas. One is, during the four-day public holiday, we are monitoring the situation to see if there will be outbreaks and also if there will be a rebound of cases after this long holiday – people have been gathering during the Lunar New Year holiday. Second, after we have relaxed these measures, there are more people going to these premises. Again, we have to be very careful in monitoring the situation. So I do not think the next phase of relaxation will be very soon.

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