

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 morning (April 21):

Reporter: First, regarding the relaxation of the requirement asking restaurants to only run at half capacity, does the Government feel that this measure is not really necessary nowadays? Does that mean as long as the restaurant is big enough and you have enough space, you can technically run at full capacity? Isn't that still a bit risky for the current situation? Second question, is the Government aiming to see 28 days without new infections, then it would give us a better idea of whether you guys will lift the social distancing measures? Third question regarding the use of a Kowloon City hotel. Is it that the Government could not find any hotels that are closer to the airport or in more remote areas that can fulfil the ventilation requirements and can be used? Because there actually is Regal Airport Hotel. Why can't it be used if it is from the same company? How would you respond to criticisms from some of the district representatives that there was no consultation beforehand and the Government's move is actually putting the community at risk even though you said that these people are not infected cases yet?

Secretary for Food and Health: First of all, your question is about our latest directions under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation. Yes, we have recommended and issued latest directions through notices gazetted today to suspend the requirement for the number of customers in the catering business premises at any one time to not exceed 50 per cent of the normal seating capacity of the premises. Among the eight instructions or directions that I have issued, we think that tables having a distance of 1.5 metres apart and also having partitions or effective partitions are the most important. Throughout our enforcement actions, we have actually found that as for the 1.5 metres (requirement), while it is important, sometimes it may be difficult also for the restaurants or the catering businesses to comply with. If one can do this measure effectively, that is having 1.5 metres apart between the tables as well as having effective partitions, probably the number of customers may have already fallen below 100 per cent. Therefore, in considering what to suppress and what to lift, we think this 50 per cent requirement (for seating capacity) can be lifted for the time being. We will continue to monitor the situation, and if there is an unsatisfactory situation like the restaurants being too crowded and so on, we do not rule out the possibility of changing it again or trying to suppress it again.

Your second question about when to lift the social distancing measures. I think social distancing is one of the key measures that we use to prevent the spread of the virus in the community, or to prevent community outbreak. It couples together with our testing, our contact tracing and also our isolation and quarantine measures, that must go hand in hand. Also, the

boundary restrictions are very important. These three pillars are important in our public health measures in fighting against this virus. Of course the social distancing measures require the co-operation of not only the Government but also the entire community and people to do it. Globally, many countries' economy is now being hard-hit and also there are other social issues that one has to deal with on top of public health measures. I think we have to look into how to suppress and how to lift. Obviously there are certain criteria, including the global epidemic situation or the pandemic situation. The local situation is also important, whether we have more imported cases and whether we have local cases. You know that two days ago when we found a local case after many days is also something we have to take care of. Third, I think on top of this, we also have to look at our capacity, including our testing capacity, our quarantine and isolation facilities, the capacity of our healthcare system and whether we are actually able to handle the cases if the number of confirmed cases increases. All these different measures have to go hand in hand. There is no fixed and fast formula although the guiding principle as said by some of our experts and also the Centre for Health Protection is 28 days, which is two incubation periods. Obviously incubation period, as there are more evidence and more science coming out from the disease, may change. So, we have to continue to monitor the situation, and we will see how and when it is appropriate for us to suppress or lift the measures that we are putting in place.

Your third question is about why we choose this particular hotel and not the airport hotel. In fact we have tried our very best to look for hotels including the airport hotels and hotels that are more close to the airport. First of all, I think we have to be really quick to have this waiting centre so that we can exercise or implement fully our "test and hold", that is not only to have 100 per cent of our inbound arrival travellers to take the specimens or saliva samples but also to hold them and to have them wait for the results before going back to their places of quarantine. In order to do that, the temporary testing centre at AWE (AsiaWorld-Expo) can actually hold people whose flights arrive in the morning or before noon, because they have to wait for six to eight hours. Therefore, they can wait there for this to be implemented. But for flights which we cannot control the time and also with arrival time as scheduled in the afternoon or even in the evening, we want to provide a better resting area for people who have to wait overnight for the results. Therefore, we think a hotel would be appropriate for this purpose for waiting. In this regard, the Department of Health has been trying their very best to find hotels that are suitable and have appropriate infection control environment and other measures which are appropriate in terms of facilities. It is actually not easy. We found this hotel, and we have informed the District Council. I understand that there are sentiments or questions from the community as well as the District Council. We will do our best to provide more information to explain to them, to answer their queries, and also to provide them with information. The Centre for Health Protection is organising health talks, so that the community can better understand the situation. This is not a quarantine centre, but is a centre for waiting for the results or what we say it is a holding centre for waiting for the results. For people who will be put there, they shall stay there after taking samples at the airport and just go there to wait for the results. Because the

flights arrive in the afternoon or in the evening, they need to wait overnight. All of them will only stay one night at the hotel, and they cannot go out. There will also be special transportation to take them from the airport to the hotel. After they know the results, they can go back to their quarantine place if it is negative. If it is a confirmed case, obviously they will be sent to the hospital.

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