

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

The Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, and the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan, met the media at the Central Government Offices today (August 25). Following is the transcript of remarks by Professor Chan at the media session:

Secretary for Food and Health: While the number of daily new cases has been gradually declining, the epidemic situation has still not stabilised totally. We would therefore extend the existing social distancing measures under Cap. 599F, Cap. 599G and also Cap. 599I for two more days until August 27.

However, under the new normal, it is not possible for us to wait until there are no more local cases before relaxing the social distancing measures. Hence, unless there are drastic changes to the epidemic situation, we would issue new directions before Friday on the following areas to:

- (1) Extend the dine-in services allowed to 9pm;
- (2) Allow re-opening of the following scheduled premises: cinemas, beauty parlours, and some outdoor sports premises for activities involving little physical contact; and
- (3) Allow people not to wear masks in country parks while doing exercises.

Having regard to the benefits that exercising would bring to one's physical and mental well-being, we have also amended Cap. 599I to include engaging in strenuous exercise in an outdoor place as a reasonable excuse for not wearing a mask so as to encourage the public to exercise more.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind the public not to let down their guard during the fight against COVID-19. One key area is to maintain good personal and environmental hygiene. I would also like to encourage members of the public to participate in the Universal Community Testing Programme, which would help us identify silent carriers and also curb the spread of COVID-19 in the community.

Reporter: Secretary, why is the Government planning to wait until Friday to relax some measures but not from tomorrow? Is two days going to make like a huge difference? And you said the relaxation would not happen if there are drastic changes to the epidemic situation. What do you actually mean by that? Are you talking about an increase of cases to a certain level? What level are you talking about? Second question, Why 9pm, not 10pm, not 11pm or not till next morning? Apart from keeping some of the existing requirements, for example, the two-person per table requirement, will the restaurants be required by law to take extra measures so that even though there is a relaxation people will still be safe? Some experts said that an extension of the dining in hours would actually compromise the Government's universal testing scheme, it is because right now the scheme doesn't have a stay-at-home order to go with it already and a relaxation would actually encourage

more people to go out. So how would you respond to that?

Secretary for Food and Health: Thank you for your questions. First of all, as I have already said and also Dr Constance Chan, our Director of Health, has already said the entire situation of the epidemic in Hong Kong is not entirely stable but of course we have also observed a downward trend of the number of confirmed cases. While there are still cases whereby we cannot find the source immediately, that means there are some asymptomatic cases and silent transmission chains in the community. I think it is important for us to observe a few more days so that we are confident that the situation is more or less more stabilised so that's why it is not today and it is Friday, of course we would continue to observe the situation until that time.

Secondly, the whole point of extending the dine-in hour is because we observe there are some real needs in the community, for example, people who are working night shifts may like to have dinner outside. There is also an outcry among the people because they are all quite fatigued. Therefore, given the situation under the new normal and also the recent situation of the epidemic, we felt that we can extend a few hours in the dine-in hours. Why 9pm and not 10pm and not 11pm? I think it is because we want to shorten the time of people having masks-off activities. Then, balancing the need for eating in and having a shorter time (of people with masks off), we think probably 9pm and not later is appropriate in this context. The two-person requirement to be maintained is for the same reason. We do not want to have too many people gathering together while they have their masks off. Another reason is also because we want to do the relaxation in a gradual manner, so that we do not relax everything at the same time. It is because people's mobility is also something that we want to control. And the extra measures that you have mentioned in the catering business or the eateries, we have been working closely with the trade and they take initiatives in working towards some of the measures suggested by our experts, for example, improving the air change and having different staff working on different procedures in the eateries such as delivering the food and taking care the utensils after eating. So I think some of these measures, we are confident if it can be put in place, it would reduce the risk of spreading (of virus).

Finally, the Universal Community Testing Programme will be starting very soon. I think it is an important public health measure so that we can, first of all, understand the entire infection or spreading situation in the community. We know that there are still cases that have unknown sources and there are asymptomatic cases in the community. If we can do this Universal Community Testing Programme in a short period of time while we have a big testing capacity, we can hopefully in one go try to understand more about the community spreading situation. We can find out or detect the asymptomatic cases and isolate them and contain them and treat them, so that we can improve the entire epidemic situation. I think it is also important that people would take the message of relaxation as not a total relaxation. I think this is very important and that's why the Director of Health has given certain appeals. While we want to resume some of the normal activities in people's daily lives and also some economic activities at the same time under this new normal, it is important that we understand the virus is probably

here. As the Government, we are doing our best to contain and to control it. But at the same time when people are trying to go out and trying to resume some of these activities, which seems inevitable for many people, they also have to take precautions themselves. So I think this message, I hope it can be given to the community.

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