

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

The Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, and the Deputy Secretary for Food and Health (Health), Mr Howard Chan, met the media today (October 27). Following is the transcript of remarks by Professor Chan at the media session:

Secretary for Food and Health: As we all know, the local epidemic situation showed signs of rebound early this month. We are fortunate that, with the concerted efforts of the Government and the society to fight the virus, the epidemic situation continued to subside over the past two weeks, with the seven-day average number of locally confirmed cases decreasing gradually since mid-October.

But I must point out that there are still sporadic cases especially those with unknown sources of infection reported in different districts in Hong Kong. That shows that there are still community transmission chains. Meanwhile, globally, there are worsening epidemic situations. That may continue to pose some public health risks to Hong Kong although we already have a very stringent control and we have tightened our border control measures.

Under the new normal, we cannot and should not aim to have no confirmed case in the community for an extended period of time. It would be unavoidable that there may be some sporadic cases and small clusters in the community from time to time. I think the most important thing is that we have the capacity and capability to stabilise the situation once there is infection or outbreak.

The Government has adopted a targeted approach for reducing the risk of the virus spreading within the community as far as practicable. So we would avoid the one-size-fits-all approach. We are doing more targeted and sophisticated approaches in order to allow members of the public to maintain social and economic activities to a certain extent as far as practicable under the new normal.

After taking into account the latest public health risk assessment, we are striking a balance with economic needs, the level of acceptance of the society, and the economic situation and job loss situation. The Government decided to continue relaxing social distancing measures imposed under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance in a gradual and also orderly manner.

Starting from this Friday (October 30), the following adjustments will be made to the social distancing measures:

(1) dine-in services would be allowed at all catering business premises until 2am;

(2) the number of persons that may be seated together at one table will be increased from four to six for catering business premises except bars or pubs; and from two to four for bars or pubs and clubs or nightclubs;

(3) members of the public must only take off their masks to consume food or drink at the table but not at any other places within bars or pubs and clubs or nightclubs. In other words, a person must not eat or drink and must wear a mask when he or she is away from the table;

(4) live performances and dancing activities will be allowed to take place in catering business premises and clubs or nightclubs, subject to the implementation of suitable infection prevention and control measures;

(5) members of the public are not required to wear masks when doing exercise in indoor sports premises or public skating rinks; and

(6) the total number of people allowed in catering business premises including bars and pubs, public entertainment venues including theme parks, performance venues, etc, nightclubs, and swimming pools will be increased from 50 per cent to 75 per cent of the capacity of the respective premises.

Apart from the above adjustments, other social distancing measures concerning catering business premises, scheduled premises, group gatherings and mask-wearing requirement will be extended. This latest set of measures will be effective for seven days, from October 30 to November 5.

Moreover, as the Chief Executive mentioned this morning, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department will announce the arrangements of re-opening the beaches under its management later separately.

As we have stressed now time and again, the co-operation and self-discipline of members of the public are keys to the effectiveness of our social distancing measures in the prevention of the spread of the disease in the community. I would like to take the opportunity to appeal to the public again to remain vigilant, observe good personal and environmental hygiene and comply with the requirements and restrictions applicable to individual premises. It is also important for the trade to comply with what they are being asked especially in fulfilling or complying with those critical control points that we have identified, and that our experts have worked with them so that they put in place measures to mitigate and control the risks arising from those critical control points.

Finally, I would also like to say a few words on specifying Belgium under the Prevention and Control of Disease (Regulation of Cross-boundary Conveyances and Travellers) Regulation (Cap. 599H). In view of the severe COVID-19 epidemic situation worldwide, we cannot afford to drop our guard. Therefore, the Government, among these measures, will be gazetting later today specifications to include Belgium as a specified place under Cap. 599H with effect from November 3 with regard to the latest public health risk assessment.

The Government will continue to monitor other countries and their

situation very closely, including the developments of the epidemic situations not only globally but also locally and review our various epidemic control measures from time to time so as to make suitable adjustments to the measures taking into consideration of all related factors.

Reporter: Can you give us more details on the Mainland quarantine exemption next month that was announced by the Chief Executive this morning, including how many people will be involved? What circumstances will allow people to qualify? Whether certain people can get priority, and if they will be required to test negative and present a certificate 72 hours before the arrival. Why not Macao? Why isn't Macao involved in this as well?

Second, with enforcement issues at bars where only two people per table are allowed, how will authorities ensure that the new rules will be followed? Have the authorities considered Professor Yuen Kwok-yung's suggestion, using straws to drink alcohol to allow bars to open longer?

My third question is about the rapid testing involving the Airport Authority. How many people will be tested? Is it only for departures or only arrivals or both? Which companies will be involved and how much will it cost? Thank you.

Secretary for Food and Health: First of all, your question about the exemption. We are now working on exempting people, Hong Kong residents coming back from Guangdong Province, from 14-day mandatory quarantine if they have a negative PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test. This is what we are now studying. We do not have further details but this is the general principle because in many places of the Mainland China, if we are talking about the Guangdong Province, their epidemic situation has been stabilised for a very long time. Therefore, people coming from those places are having very, very low risks. Therefore, after the Department of Health have assessed the risk, we can work on the direction on exempting their 14-day mandatory quarantine if they can present a negative test of PCR.

Regarding bars, now we have our Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, which has been working with the trade in order to put in place a number of critical control points and measures that our experts felt that it is important. First of all, it is about the air exchanges. Secondly, they put in place health declarations, so that when people go into the bars, they would leave their contact details and do the health declarations. Thirdly, their staff will be tested. Finally, Professor Yuen has suggested that people, in order to reduce the time of putting off or not wearing masks, may use a straw to drink from the glass. They are continuing to work on that and the trade has been more or less very co-operative, and they will continue to work out these measures so as to mitigate and control the risk arising from the behavior of people at the bars.

Finally, it's the rapid testing. The Airport Authority has been working with some private laboratories in the use of the rapid tests, as well as the PCR tests, starting from this week, probably tomorrow. With this test, we can actually understand more about the validity, sensitivity and specificity of the rapid test because we do not want to have a rapid test that is not valid

or that is not sensitive enough to identify the confirmed cases. Therefore, while using rapid tests is the trend and also has its benefits because the PCR tests usually take very long. In the event, or in the future when these cross-boundary travels resume to a more normal situation, the current situation would not be sustainable. Therefore, looking into the use and also validity of these rapid tests is important.

Reporter: Professor Chan, you said that most Mainland Chinese provinces are relatively stable, but Macao has not had a new case in a very long time, so why is it not included as well?

Secretary for Food and Health: We would not rule out Macao. But it is just done in a step-by-step way. I confirm that Macao is also very stable in terms of epidemic situation.

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