

Transcript of remarks of press conference on anti-epidemic measures

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference on anti-epidemic measures this morning (April 14). Also joining were the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, and the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services, Mr Vincent Liu. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference:

Reporter: Good morning. The Easter holiday starts tomorrow. People flow on streets might increase, leading to a COVID case rebound. Has the scheduling date of relaxing social distancing measures on April 21 taken this potential risk into account? Does setting the relaxation date on next Thursday after the Easter holiday contradict with its aim? Is it possible that the relaxation could be suddenly halted after the Easter break and before April 21? And the second question is, will there be any circuit-breaker system for the relaxation if COVID cases surge in certain premises? If yes, to what extent if the number of cases goes up again will the premises be asked to close again? Who has the power to decide and make such order? Is it the Secretary for Food and Health or the Chief Executive? The last question is, for those who have taken their first jab but (have been) infected before getting their second jab and have a three-month exemption from getting the second dose, what will be the arrangement for them in cinemas and also restaurants? Thank you.

Chief Executive: I will answer the first two questions and then invite the Secretary for Food and Health to address the vaccination issue. Yes, we will start the Easter holiday tomorrow, and after the Easter holiday, schools will resume their (face-to-face) learning from April 19. The first phase of relaxation on April 21 will go ahead. I don't think we would be caught in a situation that we need to put on hold what we announced this morning about the first-phase relaxation; I'll come to the point about the precautionary measures and the capacity building that we have done over the past three months, which enable us to manage the possible risk of a rebound in cases. You'd remember that when I mentioned about relaxation of social distancing measures on March 21, it was supposed to take place in a gradual, orderly manner through three stages over a period of three months. We have not gone into detail this morning about the second phase and the third phase – exactly because we need to monitor the situation after the Easter holiday and also to take account of possible scenarios of a sudden increase in confirmed cases. That's the position we are taking.

It is not a matter of contradiction. It is a question of meeting the aspirations of Hong Kong people and a large number of business premises which have not had a chance to do business for a very long period of time. This is what I repeatedly said: in our anti-epidemic work, it is not simply just a public health issue. We have to take account of the social and economic needs. In the case of school resumption, we have to take into account the mental health of the young children. And you asked about what is the

authority to decide. The authority is a steering committee chaired by myself within the Hong Kong SAR Government which has been set up since the epidemic hit us in early 2020 – I think it was set up in January, late January 2020 – and has gone on throughout the last two years and three months with myself as the chair and all Principal Officials participating, as well as some heads of departments, whenever we have a particular issue that we need to tackle. In terms of legal provision, the order is to be made by the Secretary for Food and Health under Cap. 599F (Prevention and Control of Disease (Requirements and Directions) (Business and Premises) Regulation) as far as scheduled premises are concerned. But every decision is made by a very high-level committee taking account of all the factors that I have just mentioned.

We could not give you an exact figure of what we would do when the daily number of cases hit a certain number because, in public health terms, it's more important and relevant to look at the trend rather than a daily figure which could be affected by various situations. Clearly, we are now trending down. It's not only the daily confirmed cases that has dropped by over 90 per cent, but all the other indicators that we have been monitoring, from the sewage tests to the number of positive cases discovered in a "restriction-testing declaration" operation to the overall positive rate of some 80 000 PCR (polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid) tests taken every day at the various venues. All indicators are trending down, representing an over 90 per cent decrease from March 21 when I announced the plan to gradually open up the Hong Kong society. On the other hand, at this point in time and in the near future, Hong Kong is much, much better prepared to handle another wave. Nobody wants the sixth wave but if a sixth wave hits us, we are now much, much better prepared. One is because of the level of vaccination. Our problem now is with the elderly, we still have 30 per cent of them unvaccinated, and with the children aged between 3 and 11, we still have about 35 per cent of them unvaccinated, but this is much better than the end of last year already. And then we have far more facilities to handle confirmed cases, ranging from home support teams to the community isolation facilities to holding centres for the elderly and the community treatment centre of the Hospital Authority and also designated COVID-19 hospital beds in the Hospital Authority. You have heard us saying that now everything is in a very good preparatory mode. The rooms, the beds, the vaccines are all waiting to tackle any possible surge in the situations.

With this greater capacity, it would be very, very unreasonable, and perhaps unacceptable, to the majority of Hong Kong people to continue to close all these premises and allow people no chance to lead a normal life. I don't think that is what Hong Kong people want, let alone the premises operators, some of whom will be disappointed by what we announced this morning because they are not in the first phase of reopening, just like those of bars that somebody has asked about. This is a very balanced and prudent approach in order to meet the needs of Hong Kong.

Secretary for Food and Health: About recovered patients and vaccination, and also the requirements in these premises as per Vaccine Pass, first of all, if you are a recovered patient or recovered person, it's like you have taken one dose of vaccine. If you have been infected, you are given six months to do

your jabs in terms of meeting the requirement for Vaccine Pass. So for person who has not had any vaccination and is a recovered patient, it's like you have already got one dose. Similarly, if you had one jab, then it is like you had two jabs. If you have done two jabs, then it means you have met the requirements for three jabs. Of course, one has to look at the Vaccine Pass requirements, that is whether it is two jabs or three jabs that one have to follow, but you are given time to do that.

Secondly, we are still working very closely with ITB (Innovation and Technology Bureau) on the recovered patient's QR code. Right now, we accept paper (form). That is, when you have any certification that you can get in terms of certifying you are a recovered patient, like (having been) discharged from hospital or an isolation order, you can show it to the people who check on the Vaccine Pass. But I think in the near future, when the digitalised model is ready, you would be able to do it with the Vaccine Pass QR code which you can show to the operator or the people who check on the Vaccine Pass. Thank you.

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