

Transcript of remarks of press conference on measures against novel coronavirus infection

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, held a press conference on measures against novel coronavirus infection on January 25. Also joining were the Chair Professor of Public Health Medicine, and Founding Director of the WHO Collaborating Centre for Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Control at the University of Hong Kong, Professor Gabriel Leung; the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan; the Chief Executive of the Hospital Authority, Dr Tony Ko; and the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung. Following is the transcript of remarks of the press conference.

Reporter: The Government has identified the first highly suspected case on the 22nd. On the 23rd, you were in Davos and on the 24th you spent a day travelling back. And on today you rolled out a basket of measures against the spread of the virus in Hong Kong. Could they not have been implemented in your absence, given some of them were actually suggested by local academics and experts before you arrived in Hong Kong? Could they not be put in place earlier? Second, why set up this expert panel when the advice given by renowned microbiologist and medical experts in Hong Kong such as to roll out more health declaration forms in all ports and then stepping up your contingency plan level has been made days before you arrived back in Hong Kong and were not answered by your government. So why set up this expert panel if you're not going to listen to them? And also on the mask ban, is the Government going to continue its appeal on the court's ruling that the anti-mask law is unconstitutional given that the novel coronavirus has reached Hong Kong? Why has the Government not made an official appeal to people to wear masks in public? Thank you.

Chief Executive: Of the three questions, first of all, it has lasted for about slightly more than three weeks now, throughout the process we have been taking forward our actions in a very systematic manner based on scientific evidence and advice from the experts. I would dispute your allegation that we have not been listening to the experts. Professor Chan has been meeting with the experts, Dr Constance Chan has been meeting with the experts almost on a daily basis to take their advice. But what has happened is we reached a critical point on the January 23 when there were two confirmed cases of this novel coronavirus. At each stage the Government's actions and reactions have to take into account the latest development, the severity of the public health situation and the advice that we receive from our experts. I thought that was a very simple sequence of events. There was absolutely no intention or plan to delay actions because of other non-health reasons. And it also has nothing to do with my absence from Hong Kong because despite my physical absence, I've been keeping in close contact with the Chief Secretary and the Secretary for Food and Health. I hope that we will see this in a very

rational way.

The second point is about the experts. As I said, the experts have always been there to help us in providing the scientific evidence, the analysis and advice. But there are advice that maybe you will regard that we could not implement immediately because there are operational issues that we have to make sure before we could implement it. To have large numbers of health declaration forms in all the border control points could pose problem. That's why at the same time the health authorities together with the support of the Innovation and Technology Bureau have now put on a trial run of doing this electronically, so we are in a better position as a government to assure the people of Hong Kong that when we introduce a measure we are able to do it, despite not immediately but we have plans to implement that particular measure. And we will continue to listen to the experts. The reason that the Chief Executive has appointed an expert panel is because, as I said, we have reached another higher level of emergency and in order to shorten the distance between the communication of the experts with the highest authority in Hong Kong to make that decision, I think it is a very good idea for me to have direct access and for the experts to have direct access, when they have discovered something that they should immediately bring to my attention.

I understand that this higher level access of an expert advisory panel is also a recommendation from Professor Yuen Kwok-yung given to me actually earlier today. I'm sure that with that sort of communication we will be able to deal with the ever-evolving situation of this virus more effectively.

The court ruling has nothing to with this public health plan, but I would just explain that the appeal against the court decision was not so much on the anti-mask regulation made under the ERO, it was an appeal to make sure that there is still this constitutional validity of the Emergency Regulations Ordinance, because for any government, for the executive not to have any powers of that sort could in a way impede us in responding to emergency situation. I am afraid I will stop here because the case is still in a judicial process although the court hearing has taken place so I have said a little bit more commenting on this case, but I really don't think I should go further into a case that is now before the court.

Reporter: Chief Executive, why is your government 48 hours behind the first highly suspected case to realise that you need to get ahead of the epidemic? The second question is how many Mainland Chinese visitors have entered Hong Kong since the Hong Kong Government got a report of the novel coronavirus from Mainland China, and how many of the patients being treated in public hospitals or under monitor or isolation in public hospitals are actually Mainland Chinese visitors or visitors from Wuhan specifically? If such influx of visitors are going to continue, how is your strategy of containment going to work? And the third question is, earlier today there is local report that at the Sha Tau Kok checkpoint, the immigration officer actually allowed a Mainland Chinese man with fever to enter Hong Kong. Can the Government confirm there is such a case? And if science has told us that patients at the early stage of the disease might have mild or even no symptoms, how is the current monitoring strategy going to work, because you are mainly looking at

fever? Three questions, thank you.

Chief Executive: I have no details about the Sha Tau Kok case. I just checked my colleagues whether they know anything about this. No, we don't have any information about the Sha Tau Kok case. But what you have described is perhaps the difficulties we are facing in dealing with this virus, because the symptoms may be mild or even invisible at the beginning of the onset. That's why I appeal to all of us that we should all do our part to help in the containment of this rather tricky virus.

As far as the timing, I have explained that in the whole process, since receiving notification, we were very much on the alert. At every stage of the situation we implemented measures with a view to contain and arrest the situation from being deteriorating. Similarly, when the first two cases were confirmed in the evening of January 23, the Chief Secretary for Administration has already hosted a press conference to announce some of the measures that we are going to put in place. Following continuous monitoring and discussions with the experts this morning and amongst our own colleagues, we came up with another package of the strategy with the detailed proposals. You will notice that some are actually enhancement to existing things that we have been doing in light of the situation and the resources that we wish to put into these measures. I wouldn't say that this is a delay, because the situation is evolving and we are putting in the best responses to control the spread of the virus.

As far as the number of patients being treated in isolation facilities, I don't know whether Dr Ko has any information on that and the overall workload on the public hospitals. But I remember Dr Ko has already described in detail the various contingency measures that the Hospital Authority will implement in order to free up more capacity to deal with patients that require to be monitored or be treated in this public health incident.

Chief Executive of Hospital Authority: Because one of the notification criteria of patients who are admitted, being notified and also tested, is that they have been visiting Wuhan. All the patients that we have notified have history of visiting Wuhan. Up to 12 pm today, we have accumulative of 305 cases who fulfil the criteria, and all of these cases have history of visiting Wuhan. And of course we are concerned and we are closely monitoring the epidemiology evolution because the notification criteria may have to be readjusted according to how the infection is going to change. And accordingly, as mentioned by the Chief Executive, we are doing works to increase our isolation beds and also laboratory and the related capability so that if more patients need to be treated and isolated, we will have the capability to do so.

Reporter: (inaudible)

Chief Executive of Hospital Authority: In treating these patients, our main concern is their epidemiological link, whether they have visited Wuhan or not. We treat and manage these cases in the same manner.

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