

CE inspects COVID-19 sewage-related virus surveillance work (with photos/video)

The Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, accompanied by the Secretary for the Environment, Mr Wong Kam-sing, and the Director of Drainage Services, Ms Alice Pang, today (February 15) inspected the surveillance work to detect the COVID-19 virus in sewage to learn more about how to help with the identification of asymptomatic patients in the community through sewage surveillance.

Mrs Lam and the officials this morning visited a sewage sampling site in Central and Western District set up by the Drainage Services Department (DSD) to inspect the sampling workflow. She thanked the DSD colleagues and contractors for their continuous support in conducting hours-long sampling work at specified outdoor sites upon very short notice every day to collaborate with the research team.

They then went to the public health laboratory of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and were briefed by Professor Gabriel Leung, the Dean of Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of HKU, and Professor Zhang Tong of the Environmental Microbiome Engineering and Biotechnology Laboratory of the Department of Civil Engineering of HKU, on the treatment of samples and testing process matters. Mrs Lam also chatted with a number of researchers and PhD students and noted that they continued to work industriously even during the Lunar New Year holidays. She said that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has been vigorously promoting the development of innovation and technology (I&T) in Hong Kong in recent years and that universities' research capabilities and their level is an important foundation of I&T.

The Government's Environmental Protection Department (EPD) and the DSD have been collaborating with the cross-disciplinary team of HKU in the research of sewage surveillance since last year. Following continued improvement and verification, the technology has been applied in monitoring the situation of the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the community and individual buildings, providing crucial support for the Food and Health Bureau in its identification of buildings and places for compulsory testing or "restriction-testing declaration" operations. From the end of last year till now, the Government has conducted compulsory testing operations on more than 110 buildings with positive sewage testing results, identifying more than 50 confirmed cases. A significant number of them were found before there were confirmed cases in the buildings, and the results have been remarkable. The laboratory of HKU can currently process 24 samples per day. The Government is seeking to increase the testing capability as soon as possible with the purchase of more equipment and collaboration with other private laboratories.

The research project concerned is funded by the Health and Medical Research Fund (HMRF) of the Government. As the Chief Executive said earlier, technological research and application is part of the Government's strategy and response in the fight against the epidemic. The Government's HMRF approved a total of \$170 million to support 49 medical research projects on COVID-19 by local universities. In addition, the University Grants Committee and the Research Grants Council have to date granted \$350 million to subsidise research projects in relation to COVID-19 and other novel infectious diseases.

"I thank the cross-disciplinary team of HKU and colleagues of government departments, including the DSD and the EPD, for their hard work over a period of time in the past, and standing fast at their posts during the Lunar New Year holidays to fight the virus through sewage surveillance. The anti-epidemic work of the Government has all along been based on science. The sewage surveillance project is an extremely good example of our joint efforts with local scientific teams to fight the virus with technology. We will continue to leverage technology to achieve even better results in our anti-epidemic work," Mrs Lam said.

