

CHP's response to quarantine requirement

In response to the community's concerns over the requirement for close contacts of confirmed local case of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) with N501Y mutant strain or other variants of concern (VOC) to undergo compulsory quarantine for 21 days, the spokesman for the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health today (May 2) elaborated further on the relevant arrangements.

The spokesman said, "In view of the local cases with unknown sources of infection involving VOC, the Government has to adopt swift and stringent testing and quarantine measures, with an aim to cutting the transmission chains as soon as possible. The quarantine arrangement is based on risk assessment, the prevailing epidemiology of COVID-19 and the circumstances of each individual case."

As the local cases with mutant strain carrying N501Y and E484K mutations were detected in the building, in view of the higher transmissibility, the CHP considered that the residents of all units on all floors of the buildings concerned could have been exposed to the risk of contracting COVID-19 through sharing of common facilities within the building. Hence it is imperative to carry out prudent infection control and prevention measures. Arranging compulsory quarantine for 21 days for asymptomatic residents under the Prevention and Control of Disease Regulation (Cap. 599A) would be essential to stop the potential risk of spread of the mutant strain into the community.

According to the latest epidemiological information, COVID-19 infection might have a prolonged incubation period and some VOC cases involving inbound travellers were detected only towards the end of their 21-day quarantine period. The CHP considered that those VOC-related close contacts who have been tested negative in the early phase after exposure might still be incubating the disease. Therefore they need to be put under quarantine for 21 days since their last exposure to the case or last stay in the affected building with cases. For those who are tested positive, they would be admitted to hospitals for further management.

The spokesman explained, "There is 24-hour on-site medical support at quarantine centres, allowing better medical care to close contacts. Our healthcare professionals can provide medical surveillance and primary medical care for them. Quarantine at a quarantine centre protects both the persons under quarantine and the community at large."

For the evacuation of Block 11 of Caribbean Coast, a total of 1 027 residents were arranged for admission to quarantine centres and the Government managed to transfer almost all of them within 24 hours. The spokesman pointed out that being the largest evacuation operation during this

epidemic, there would be huge challenges regarding the transfer and the arrangement of accommodation for the residents. The CHP has been working closely with the Civil Aid Service, the Auxiliary Medical Service and the Social Welfare Department to ensure daily necessities could be delivered to the close contacts in the quarantine centres in time.

Regarding quarantine arrangement for vaccinated persons, during the meeting on April 22 by the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases and the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases under the CHP, joined by the Chief Executive's expert advisory panel (JSC-EAP), members discussed the possibility of exempting close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases from the existing quarantine measures, if they are fully vaccinated with COVID-19 vaccines. In view of limited data, and concerns about emerging COVID-19 variants, the JSC-EAP considered that the current quarantine practice on close contacts should continue at this stage until more supporting evidence becomes available.

The spokesman for the CHP said, "In view of the threat posed by the mutant strain, we call on the public for their understanding and co-operation with all the infection control and prevention arrangement as well as anti-epidemic measures, fighting the virus together."