

FHB's Health and Medical Research Fund subsidises second batch of COVID-19 research

The Research Council chaired by the Secretary for Food and Health has approved a further \$59 million in funding today (August 5) to support local universities to conduct research studies on COVID-19 under the Health and Medical Research Fund (HMRF). Funding of \$111 million for 26 applications in an earlier batch was announced on April 27.

These newly approved studies will cover a wide range of topics including waste water and genomic surveillance to track SARS-CoV-2 transmission, identification of facilitators and barriers to public compliance with infection control measures, zoonotic risk in companion animals, the effect of smoking and pre-exposure of influenza viruses, screening of traditional Chinese medicine for antiviral compounds, rehabilitation management for COVID-19 survivors, and estimation of psychological burden.

These studies address important research areas in effective detection and surveillance of the disease and post-infection follow-up. Water waste surveillance from the local airport, inbound airplanes, sewage treatment facilities, quarantine centres and housing estates can provide a complementary system to monitor virus activity at the population level and to detect a resurgence of COVID-19 at an early stage. Genomic surveillance using whole virus sequence data linked to a geographic information system can help identify the source of infection and untangle silent virus transmission in the community when combined with epidemiological investigations. Programmes to evaluate physical fitness, cognitive status and psychological burden of COVID-19 survivors, healthcare workers and the general public can facilitate delivery of more effective rehabilitation management to improve quality of life and alleviate mental health issues. These studies will last from 12 months to 24 months.

"Together with the first batch of applications approved in April this year, the HMRF has provided total funding of \$170 million in supporting COVID-19 research. The rapid spread of COVID-19 around the globe has created unprecedented challenges to public healthcare systems. The Food and Health Bureau expects the scientific evidence generated from these studies will help inform control measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and protect the health of the Hong Kong population," the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, said.

Professor Chan expressed her immense gratitude to members of the Research Council and the Assessment Panel for Commissioned Research on COVID-19 who have contributed their precious time, valuable advice and efforts to support the commissioning of these urgent research projects within a very tight timeline.

The HMRF supports studies and projects initiated by individual investigators as well as those commissioned by the Food and Health Bureau to build research capacity, fill knowledge gaps, support policy formulation, address specific issues, assess needs and threats, conduct health promotion, and more. For commissioned studies and projects, based on the research expertise, relevant institutions will be specially invited by the bureau to submit a portfolio of research/projects for consideration.

Details of the approved projects on COVID-19 are available at the website at rfs.fhb.gov.hk/images/HMRF/COVID_19_List2.pdf.