

Government stays vigilant to cope with next wave of COVID-19 epidemic

The Government today (September 18) announced its work plan and a range of preparations for preventing and combating the next wave of COVID-19 epidemic.

A spokesman for the Food and Health Bureau (FHB) said, "It has been more than two months since the beginning of the third wave of the epidemic. Although the epidemic has subsided from its peak in late July, there were still local cases among the recent confirmed cases, indicating the existence of sustained silent transmission chains in the community. While the Government will spare no efforts in containing the spread of the disease, we expect that the fourth wave of the epidemic will arrive this winter and it will likely be more severe than the third wave. To ensure the health care system and the relevant institutions are sufficiently equipped in coping with the fourth wave, the Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government will take into account experts' advice and collaborate with medical schools of universities in reviewing and summing up the work and experience gained in the prevention and control work from the third wave, to map out the strategies in tackling the next wave of epidemic and to launch a series of preparatory work right away."

The Government's priority at the moment is not to completely eliminate the virus or to achieve sustained zero infection level, but to incorporate disease prevention and control, as well as infection management, into the new normal of the day-to-day operation of the society. Overall speaking, the Government will continue to adopt the "suppress and lift" strategy and make adjustments to the various epidemic control measures in phases in a gradual and orderly manner under a refined and sophisticated approach, having regard to the actual development of the epidemic situation. Control measures to prevent the spread of disease under the multi-pronged approach include (1) stringent implementation of cross-boundary epidemic control measures; (2) comprehensive enhancements to epidemic surveillance and testing; (3) enhancements to manpower and efficiency in contact tracing; (4) additional backup quarantine and isolation facilities; (5) strengthened infection prevention and control measures for residential homes and catering businesses; (6) procurement and preparation for administration of vaccine; and (7) social distancing measures.

Stringent implementation of cross-boundary epidemic control measures

The global pandemic is accelerating. The daily number of new cases increased from around 70 000 to 100 000 between late March and mid-May to around 160 000 to 180 000 in late June, and up to around 220 000 to 290 000 new cases per day since late July. In the past week (September 7 to 13), there were over 1.8 million new cases and 40 000 new deaths reported globally, which represented a 3 per cent and 8 per cent increase respectively

compared to the previous week. In view of the severe global pandemic situation, Hong Kong cannot afford to drop its guard on entry prevention and control measures.

Cross-boundary control measures aim to prevent importation of cases. On entry control, whether entering Hong Kong by air or by land, the Government has implemented relevant quarantine and testing measures based on prevention and control risk assessments. Currently, all persons arriving at Hong Kong via the Hong Kong International Airport, including persons exempted from compulsory quarantine, have to be tested to enter Hong Kong. As for land boundary control points, regular arrivals will be subject to compulsory quarantine for 14 days at home or other accommodation, while exempted persons entering Hong Kong via land boundary control points (most being cross-boundary goods vehicle drivers) are required to be tested.

To prevent the importation of cases, the Government will continue to stay vigilant and have to maintain suitable cross-boundary testing arrangements as additional safeguard in prevention and control of disease, so as to contain the potential risk brought about by the increase of passenger flow while relaxing the control on inbound passenger traffic progressively. The Department of Health (DH) will continue to closely monitor the epidemic development around the world, maintain a list of very high risk places based on prevention and control risk assessments, and suitably adjust the quarantine and testing arrangements on arrivals in Hong Kong.

Comprehensive enhancements to epidemic surveillance and testing

Virus testing is an integral part of our epidemic control strategies. It helps to cut silent transmission chains as far and as early as possible and achieved the objective of early identification, early isolation and early treatment and slow down the transmission of the virus in the community. With the conclusion of the Universal Community Testing Programme (UCTP), the Government will continue to enhance the strategy on disease surveillance and virus testing. After the third wave of the epidemic and conclusion of the UCTP, Hong Kong has since January conducted more than 3.31 million tests, including 2.97 million which were conducted since July. Amongst the 3.31 million tests conducted, around 1.03 million tests conducted by the DH and the Hospital Authority (HA), the some 500 000 tests conducted under the Targeted Group Testing Scheme (TGTS) and around 1.78 million tests conducted via the UCTP. That is, on average around 440 000 tests were conducted per million population and some 660 tests were carried out per confirmed cases. On this basis the volume of test conducted in Hong Kong is higher than places like Singapore, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan. It shows that the use of testing as a tool for disease prevention and control has yielded certain positive results.

On disease surveillance including surveillance and tracing of cases, the DH and the HA will continue to conduct tests for ongoing epidemiological surveillance and investigation. Currently, the testing capacity for public testing services have been enhanced to more than 7 000 tests per day. If needed, the DH and the HA will also procure testing services from local

private laboratories to enhance public testing capacity. In respect of private laboratories, with the efforts of the industry and the encouragement and assistance of the Government, the overall testing capacity of the accredited private laboratories in Hong Kong has increased significantly. Tens of thousands of virus testing services can be provided within a short period of time. This supports the continued implementation and expansion of the TGTS and urgent testing need. To facilitate members of the public who perceive themselves to have a higher risk of exposure and who experience mild discomforts to undergo testing, the HA has increased the number of general outpatient clinics (GOPCs) distributing specimen collection packs to 31 starting today, and will further increase the number to over 40 GOPCs by end-September. With the significantly enhanced testing capacity, the Government will more promptly distribute specimen bottles and provide testing for contacts of confirmed cases for early identification of infected persons.

To broaden surveillance on community level, the FHB has, together with various bureaux and departments, reviewed the TGTS targeting groups with higher risk, higher exposure and workers of critical infrastructure or services. The Government will regularise the TGTS and, based on risk assessment, arrange testing on a regular basis or by random sampling for certain targeted groups depending on anti-epidemic needs, including (1) high-risk groups such as staff of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs) and nursing homes; (2) staff of critical infrastructure and services, such as slaughterhouse workers, designated frontline container terminal employees, etc.; and (3) high-exposure groups such as public transport drivers (including taxi drivers), frontline staff of catering businesses, stall operators and personnel working in markets, etc. In the eventuality of a sudden outbreak in certain groups, the Government may arrange urgent cluster testing for the relevant locations or premises with confirmed cases based on a need and risk assessment in order to identify the infected persons and cut the transmission chain as soon as possible.

Enhancements to manpower and efficiency in contact tracing

Contact tracing is also fundamental to the efforts in preventing further spread of the virus. The Government had amended the law to empower authorised officers to require a person to provide or disclose information relevant to the handling of the public health emergency, and made arrangements for public officers to be seconded to the contact tracing team, in order to strengthen the work of tracing close contacts of confirmed cases. Moreover, the FHB, together with the Innovation and Technology Bureau and other relevant departments, is developing an internal information portal specifically designed for contact tracing. The portal aims to link up various relevant departments, agencies and existing information systems for centrally and electronically collecting information needed for contact tracing, so as to streamline the procedures for information collection, input and sharing, which are mainly conducted manually at the moment. This will help speed up the DH's work in tracing contacts, as well as conducting testing and arranging quarantine or medical surveillance for such contacts.

Additional backup quarantine and isolation facilities

Quarantine and isolation of close contacts and persons with infection risks play vital roles in the containment of the epidemic. Intakes of new quarantinees to Blocks 1 to 3 of Chun Yeung Estate have been stopped, and the operation will cease in end-September the earliest. The Government will return Blocks 1 to 3 of the Estate to the Housing Authority for restoration works after vacating and disinfecting the units in mid-October, so that prospective tenants can move in by end-January 2021. To ensure adequate supply of quarantine facilities for the next wave in the epidemic, the construction of Penny's Bay Phase 2 (providing 700 units) will be completed by September. Construction of Phases 3 and 4 will be completed by end this year, providing another 2 000 units. Furthermore, the Government will reactivate the use of Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village in Chai Wan as quarantine centre, and lease the entire block of hotels to accommodate close contacts. With the above measures, the Government expect that there will be over 4 000 units for quarantine purpose by the end of this year even after the return of Chun Yeung Estate, so that we can cope with the demand arising from the next wave.

To relieve the pressure on the demand of hospital isolation beds, the Government has provided assistance to the HA to establish community treatment facilities, including the Community Treatment Facility (CTF) at the AsiaWorld-Expo (AWE) with 900 beds. To enhance the ability to handle another wave of the epidemic, with the assistance from the Central Government, the SAR Government is working to expand the CTF in the AWE with the addition of around 1 000 beds in a few weeks, and to construct a two-storey temporary hospital, which would conform to legal requirements in Hong Kong, on a piece of land of around 3 hectares near the AWE. The temporary hospital will provide negative pressure wards that can accommodate over 800 beds, and will take about four months to complete.

Strengthened infection prevention and control measures for residential homes

Outbreaks and clusters involving elderly care homes appeared for the first time in the third wave which the Government was highly concerned. The Government has set up temporary quarantine facilities specifically for residents of RCHes/RCHDs who are close contacts with nursing needs, hence they are suitable to be quarantined in regular quarantine centres. Two halls at the AWE began operation by phases from end July 2020 as quarantine facility for RCHes/RCHDs residents, and two other halls have been reserved as backup. The four halls provide a total of 640 beds. Moreover, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) arranged two rounds of virus testing for the staff of RCHes, RCHDs, and nursing homes in all districts of Hong Kong in mid-July and mid-August this year, and launched the third round of testing today. The FHB will take into account experts' advice and review the experience of the third wave in collaboration with the Labour and Welfare Bureau, the SWD, the DH and the HA etc., to strengthen the infection control measures for residential homes.

Strengthened infection prevention and control measures for catering businesses

The Food and Environment Hygiene Department (FEHD) has been strengthening manpower deployment to step up inspections at food premises in various districts across the territory to ensure that food business operators and food handlers strictly comply with the requirements set out in directions issued in relation to catering businesses. The Government will take stringent enforcement action against offenders in defiance of relevant legislations. Taking the period from September 11 to September 16 as an example, the FEHD inspected 6 178 catering business premises and initiated the prosecution procedures against the operators of 66 premises. These are mainly about violating the requirements on the distance between tables, the number of customers not exceeding half of the normal seating capacity of the premises or wearing a mask at all times within the premises except when consuming food or drink. For the latest directions that came into effect on September 18, the Police and the FEHD will conduct joint operations to catering business premises like bars or pubs in this weekend.

Making reference to the discussion between public health experts and the catering sector, the FEHD wrote to food business operators and food handlers on August 27 to provide recommendations relating to anti-epidemic efforts. The additional recommendations include effective partitioning, segregation of duties (separate staff for serving meals and after-meal clean-up), trolleys/trays/utensils handling, cleaning and disinfection, no sharing of tables and guidance on ventilation.

Procurement and preparation for administration of vaccines

The Government will adopt a "two-pronged strategy" to procure vaccines meeting the criteria of safety, efficacy and quality for the Hong Kong population. First, the Government has joined the COVAX Facility to procure vaccines to cover 35 per cent of the Hong Kong population as a form of "safety net" to cater for the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society. At the same time, with regard to scientific evidence and clinical data and in consultation with the relevant scientific committees under the DH, the Government will pursue additional supplies through the Advance Purchase Agreements (APAs) with individual vaccine developers. The Government's goal is to procure at least two candidate vaccines from different vaccine developers across different vaccine platforms under the APAs. The Government also aim to procure sufficient doses of vaccines to cover at least twice the Hong Kong population. This is to ensure that even if not all our chosen candidate vaccines under the APAs emerge as viable, territory-wide coverage can still be achieved. The Government will start working out the preparation for the administration of vaccines for the priority groups and the Hong Kong population.

An earnest appeal: Fight the virus together and keep maintaining social distancing

Having regard to the latest development of the epidemic situation and risk assessment, the Government has relaxed social distancing measures under a refined and sophisticated approach in a gradual and orderly manner in the past few weeks, so as to allow social and economic activities to resume under the new normal. The measures include relaxing the restriction on the number of persons allowed in group gatherings in public places, extending the hours when dine-in services are allowed in catering premises and relaxing the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table, and reopening all catering premises and scheduled premises. The Government stresses that, co-operation and self-discipline of members of the public is the key to the effectiveness of social distancing measures in preventing the spread of the disease in the community. Only with the cooperation of the public as a whole, the Government can continue to allow resumption of social and economic activities in a gradual and orderly manner. Otherwise, when there is another outbreak in the community, the Government will have no choice but to significantly tighten social distancing measures in order to safeguarding public health. In fact, the epidemic situation in Hong Kong has not yet stabilised. Silent transmission chains still exist in the community. At this stage, as much as the Government wishes to resume social and economic activities as far as practicable, it needs full co-operation of the public to continue to stay alert, so as to further stabilise the epidemic situation and to sustain the hard earned normal life and economic activities. As such, the Government calls on the public to continue to maintain the awareness of epidemic prevention when resuming social and economic activities, especially during the long weekend with holidays of the National Day and the day following Mid-Autumn Festival in early October, to continue to maintain personal and environmental hygiene with a view to preventing another outbreak in the community and the hard work the entire community has put in over the past two months from going in vain.

In the meantime, the Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic, and announce the latest social distancing measures in a timely manner while striking a balance among disease prevention and control, economic needs and level of acceptance of the society. Despite the Government's intention to allow members of the public to carry out certain social and economic activities under the new normal, having regard to the experience in combating the third wave of the epidemic as well as the local circumstances, it would not be possible for the Government to relax the social distancing measures by a large extent, such as to the level earlier in June. Nevertheless, when the next wave of the epidemic occurs, the Government will, depending on the actual situation at that time, adopt a more targeted approach to the tightening of the social distancing measures, in order to allow the society to maintain normal activities to some extent as far as practicable while combating the epidemic.

The spokesman for the FHB said, "The SAR Government will continue to closely monitor the development of the epidemic in Hong Kong and other places. We will also grasp the opportunity arisen from the subsiding epidemic trend to race against time to strengthen our capacity in various aspects including implementation of preventive measures in boundary control, testing, contact tracing of cases, provision of quarantine and isolation facilities,

with a view to making ample preparation for continuous anti-epidemic work. However, it should be stressed that Government measures alone are insufficient to fight the epidemic. Concerted efforts by all sectors in the society and the general public are more crucial. Members of the public should maintain social distancing as well as personal and environmental hygiene at all times, which is the key to personal protection against infection and prevention of the spread of the disease in the community. Furthermore, the next wave of the epidemic is likely to coincide with the winter surge of influenza. In this regard, the Government will roll out different seasonal influenza vaccination programmes by phases in October. The Government calls on members of the public to get prepared and receive seasonal influenza vaccination as early as possible to protect themselves and others. The Government also makes an appeal to young people that although their recovery rate after being infected is relatively high, there is still a likelihood for transmitting the disease to their family members, including the elders at home, if they are infected. Such circumstance is definitely not ideal since COVID-19 virus has a greater impact on elders and persons with chronic diseases. It is hoped that all members of the public can continue to fight the virus for the sake of themselves, their families and our healthcare system."