

LCQ20: Coronavirus Disease 2019 vaccines

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (May 26):

Question:

Two Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccines (i.e. the Sinovac and BioNTech vaccines) are provided under the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme, which commenced on February 26 this year, for members of the public to choose for vaccination for free. According to the Government's plan, the Community Vaccination Centres (CVCs) will operate until the end of September this year. As the BioNTech vaccine is administered only in CVCs, members of the public may only receive the Sinovac vaccine from October onwards. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective latest information below on the aforesaid two types of vaccines: (i) the shipment quantity, (ii) the quantity used, (iii) the quantity of vaccine yet to be delivered, broken down by the expected dates of delivery to Hong Kong, and (iv) the quantity discarded and the reasons for that; the projected stock of the two types of vaccines as of 1 October this year, broken down by expiry date, and the ways in which the unused doses of the BioNTech vaccine will be disposed of;

(2) as the manufacturer of the BioNTech vaccine has told the media that recipients of that vaccine may need to receive a third dose of the BioNTech vaccine before they may be fully protected, whether the Government will procure additional doses of the BioNTech vaccine for members of the public who have received two doses of the vaccine to receive their third dose for free; if so, of the details and whether it will administer the first and second doses of the BioNTech vaccine to members of the public at that time; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) whether it will make enquiries with the manufacturer of the Sinovac vaccine on whether the recipients of the vaccine need to receive a third dose of the vaccine for better protection; and

(4) of the latest status of the Government's plan to procure the AstraZeneca vaccine; as the Government has indicated earlier on that it has started to explore the procurement of vaccines of the next generation with stronger protection against COVID-19 virus variants, of the manufacturers whom the Government has contacted and the technology platforms adopted by them?

Reply:

President,

So far, the Government has procured and authorised a total of 15 million doses of the Sinovac and Comirnaty vaccines for emergency use. The procured quantity is sufficient for vaccination by the entire population of Hong Kong. Since the launch of the Vaccination Programme on February 26, as at May 24, over 2.17 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines had been administered to members of the public. Among them, over 1.26 million persons had received their first dose, accounting for 19.3 per cent of the population aged 16 or above, and about 907 000 persons had received their second dose.

The Government is implementing the Vaccination Programme at full swing. Up till now, however, our vaccination rate is still far below the level required for achieving herd immunity. Vaccination is not only the most effective and thorough measure for preventing and controlling COVID-19 but also the key to overcoming the epidemic, resuming normal ways of life and early resumption of cross-boundary travel as early as possible. We appeal to those who have not received vaccination to get vaccinated as soon as possible to protect themselves and others, thereby building up the herd immunity barrier for Hong Kong.

My reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan is as follows:

(1) As at mid-May, about two million doses each of the Sinovac vaccine and Comirnaty vaccine (Note 1) have arrived in Hong Kong; and about 940 000 and 1 230 000 doses of the Sinovac and Comirnaty vaccines were used respectively. Regarding the remaining quantity of vaccines which are yet to be delivered, we will maintain close liaison with the drug manufacturers and arrange for their delivery to Hong Kong in batches according to the purchase agreements to tie in with the progress of the Vaccination Programme.

As the drug manufacturers have scheduled the production and logistics of the vaccines in advance according to the purchase agreements, and given that the vaccines will expire, it is necessary for them to be delivered to Hong Kong in batches within a specified time frame. In particular, the Comirnaty vaccine needs to be stored in an ultra-low temperature setting, but the storage space of chilled warehouses meeting such requirement is limited. Moreover, the vaccines have a relatively short expiry date from the date of manufacture (around three to four months after arrival in Hong Kong). If the quantity of uptake falls short of the quantity procured, some of the precious vaccines will be wasted. On the other hand, if a large number of people want to get vaccinated shortly before the Community Vaccination Centres (CVCs) cease operation, the vaccines may be in short supply by then. Therefore, we call on members of the public not to delay and get vaccinated while current stock lasts and the service capacity is still sufficient at the CVCs.

To avoid wastage amid tight global supply, the Government will, based on the vaccination and appointment trends, estimate the quantity of vaccines that may become excessive, and discuss with the drug manufacturers how to handle the expected surplus doses which are unused in this phase of the Vaccination Programme within this year or before their expiry dates. Options

being explored include postponing or cancelling delivery of certain batches or donating them to places more in need of vaccines through channels like the World Health Organization (WHO). Drug manufacturers' consent is required for such arrangements and the Government will still have to bear the relevant expenses as per the purchase agreements. It is estimated that postponed delivery can only be rescheduled to next year the soonest; while cancelled or donated vaccines will not be replenished under the current purchase agreements.

When preparing for the next phase of the Vaccination Programme, the Government will also consider procuring the next generation vaccines. Given the persistent tight global supply, we expect that drug manufacturers as well as the WHO will decide the quantity of vaccines to be distributed to Hong Kong under their global vaccine supply strategies having regard to our response in the current phase of the Vaccination Programme. In view of the serious vaccine hesitancy in Hong Kong, the chance of the procured vaccines being in surplus is high. As such, in the next round of procurement negotiations with the drug manufacturers, we may not be able to get an outcome as desirable as that in the present round. At this stage, we do not know if we will be able to procure vaccine doses sufficient for the entire Hong Kong population in the next round of procurement.

(2) and (3) We have been keeping a close watch on the development of different vaccines and technology platforms, as well as the latest research data published by different drug manufacturers. As far the Comirnaty vaccine is concerned, according to media reports and information made public by the manufacturer, it is very likely that vaccine recipients will need a third booster dose within 12 months of receiving their second dose, and thereafter a booster dose will be required every year to enhance the efficacy of the vaccine, particularly in regard to the mutant variants. It is understood that the manufacturer is conducting research on the interval for booster injections and the safety, immunogenicity and efficacy of the booster dose. As for the Sinovac vaccine, as the need for a booster dose has yet to be established, the Government will maintain close liaison with the manufacturer and make reference to WHO's guidelines on COVID-19 vaccines to obtain the latest information.

On the other hand, we have started to consider procuring the next generation COVID-19 vaccines as boosters and plan for the next phase of the Vaccination Programme in Hong Kong. The efficacy and protection against mutant virus strains of the next generation vaccines are important considerations when we procure and authorise COVID-19 vaccines in the future. Although we cannot predict with certainty when the next generation vaccines will be available, we have started to discuss with vaccine manufacturers of various places to provide Hong Kong with the next generation vaccines, so as to tie in with the next phase of COVID-19 Vaccination Programme.

However, many experts have pointed out that it remains highly uncertain as to when the next generation vaccines will be available and the efficacy of the booster dose will be largely dependent on whether citizens have been vaccinated with vaccines available in the current phase of the Vaccination

Programme. In the next phase Vaccination Programme, we are preparing to provide booster dose to those who have already been vaccinated in the current phase. As regards those who have not received vaccination in the current phase, whether and how they should receive the booster dose or other vaccines, we will listen to the expert advice of the Scientific Committee and then make arrangements. Members of the public should get vaccinated as soon as possible with the two vaccines currently available in Hong Kong instead of waiting for the next generation vaccines.

(4) So far, the Government has procured and authorised a total of 15 million doses of the Sinovac and Comirnaty vaccines for emergency use. The procured quantity is sufficient for vaccination by the entire population of Hong Kong. The supply of vaccines that we have agreed with the drug manufacturers can also ensure the sustainability of the first phase of the Vaccination Programme. Given that we have a sufficient supply of vaccines for the time being and it is important to avoid wastage amid global shortage, we do not see a need for the AstraZeneca vaccine to be delivered to Hong Kong within this year.

The Government has been negotiating the procurement of vaccines with different vaccine manufacturers and seeking more information on vaccines developed through different technology platforms. Given the confidentiality of the purchase agreements with the manufacturers, we cannot disclose the details of procurement.

Note 1: The two million odd doses of the Comirnaty vaccine that have arrived in Hong Kong do not include the 1.19 million odd doses that had to be returned to the German manufacturer BioNTech due to packaging defects.