

LCQ4: Quarantine arrangements for imported cats and dogs

Following is a question by Professor the Hon Priscilla Leung and a reply by the Secretary for Environment and Ecology, Mr Tse Chin-wan, in the Legislative Council today (June 11):

Question:

The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department has updated the quarantine arrangements for cats and dogs this month. Cats and dogs imported from the Mainland that meet the relevant quarantine requirements (including obtaining satisfactory results from testing conducted by recognised laboratories on the Mainland and having an animal health certificate issued by Mainland official veterinarians) will have their quarantine period significantly reduced from the current 120 days to 30 days upon arrival in Hong Kong. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that imported cats and dogs are currently required to be quarantined at designated quarantine facilities, whether the authorities will consider introducing a flexible mode of quarantine, e.g. home quarantine for the entire period, or a mixed mode involving "quarantine at a facility for the first 15 days and home quarantine for the remaining 15 days", with a view to relieving the financial burden on animal owners and enhancing the efficiency on the use of facilities;

(2) as there are views that the numbers of imported cats and dogs may increase significantly after the quarantine period is reduced, whether the Government has assessed if the numbers of quarantine facilities in Hong Kong and recognised laboratories on the Mainland are sufficient to cope with the demand, and how the authorities will ensure the quality of the relevant testing; and

(3) as there are views pointing out that there is a significant price difference between pet cats and dogs on the Mainland and in Hong Kong, and that updating the quarantine arrangements may increase the numbers of pet-keeping households in Hong Kong in the long run, whether the Government has assessed if there are sufficient veterinary equipment, clinics and hospitals in Hong Kong?

Reply:

President,

Rabies is a contagious disease that causes fatality to mammals (including humans) and no specific treatment is available at present. To prevent the introduction of animal diseases such as rabies into Hong Kong, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) regulates the import of live animals through a permit system, and controls the import of

cats and dogs under the Public Health (Animals and Birds) Regulations (Cap. 139A) and the Rabies Regulation (Cap. 421A) to protect public and animal health. Under effective control measures, Hong Kong has long been widely recognised as a rabies-free place by other places. Animals of Hong Kong generally face less stringent quarantine requirements when entering other places.

On the quarantine arrangements of imported cats and dogs, the AFCD classifies places into different groups according to different risk of rabies, with reference to information about the surveillance of animal diseases from the World Organisation for Animal Health. Group I and Group II places are respectively rabies-free places and places where rabies cases are few and under effective control. Since these places are considered of lower risk of rabies, the imported cats and dogs are exempted from quarantine upon fulfilling specified requirements. Places that do not meet the requirements of Group I or Group II, or where their situations cannot be determined, will be included in Group III. Cats and dogs imported from these places are required to undergo a quarantine of not less than 120 days before December 2024.

Since December 2024, the AFCD has divided Group III into Group A and B according to the results of risk assessment. Quarantine period for cats and dogs of Group IIIA is significantly shortened from 120 days to 30 days upon their arrival in Hong Kong, provided that they meet the relevant quarantine requirements including that the animals must be vaccinated against rabies, conducted a valid rabies neutralising antibody titre test, had an animal health certificate issued or endorsed by a government veterinary officer of the place of export. The Macao Special Administrative Region, Lithuania and the Mainland have been included in Group IIIA successively. As regards Group IIIB places, since the risk of rabies is higher or uncertain, and the incubation period of rabies can be up to several months, the quarantine period for cats and dogs imported from those places is maintained at not less than 120 days.

The reply to the question from Professor the Hon Priscilla Leung is as follows:

(1) As mentioned just now, as long as cats and dogs imported from the newly added Group IIIA places (including the Mainland) meet the relevant quarantine requirements and hold an animal health certificate issued by an official veterinarian from the Mainland, the quarantine period upon arrival in Hong Kong will be significantly reduced from 120 days to 30 days. Because of this change, the cost of quarantine facilities that the owners of these cats and dogs have to pay has been greatly reduced to one-quarter of the previous cost, at the same time, the turnover rate of quarantine facilities will increase to four times than that of the past. The waiting time for quarantine facilities will be reduced correspondingly, and the usage effectiveness will be increased significantly.

As regards the quarantine arrangements, the current international practice is to isolate cats and dogs in officially supervised quarantine

facilities to ensure that the animals will not have direct or indirect contact with other animals during the quarantine period, so as to avoid the transmission of animal disease into the community. As the mortality rate of rabies is close to 100 per cent, and animals have the opportunity to come into contact with other people or animals when they are quarantined in private premises, this will bring to them higher risk. Hence from a risk management perspective, home quarantine arrangement is not appropriate. The Department will continue to make reference to the latest animal disease situation announced by the World Organisation for Animal Health, and timely optimise the quarantine requirements for imported cats and dogs, taking into account factors such as international practices, operational experience and risk assessment.

(2) To facilitate animal owners to bring their pet cats and dogs to Hong Kong, the Government has not only optimised the quarantine requirements for cats and dogs, but also increased the number of quarantine facilities. The new quarantine facilities at the Kowloon Animal Management Centre under the AFCD have been put into service in May this year. The quarantine facilities provided for cats and dogs have increased from 21 and 20 to 34 and 30 respectively. Further, taking into account that the shortened quarantine period has increased the turnover speed to four times than that of the past, the handling capacity of the AFCD's quarantine facilities could be increased by as much as six to seven times than that of the past. In addition, the AFCD encourages private animal welfare organisations to provide quarantine facilities for cats and dogs, and is reviewing the application of the Hong Kong Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). It is expected that the quarantine facility will be put into service in the middle of this year. The Department will also provide information and assistance to other private animal welfare organisations interested in operating quarantine facilities for cats and dogs. On the basis of the above improvement measures, it is expected that the quarantine facilities will be able to meet the demand.

As regards the number and testing quality of recognised Mainland laboratories, after discussions with the Mainland authorities and taking into account the regional distribution and level of recognition of the laboratories in the Mainland, the AFCD has recognised four Mainland laboratories in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Changchun for conducting rabies antibody titre tests for cats and dogs. All four laboratories are recognised by the Mainland authorities and the European Union, hence the quality of testing is assured. The AFCD will closely monitor the situation and will discuss with the Mainland authorities to adjust the list of approved laboratories when necessary.

(3) The Veterinary Surgeons Board of Hong Kong (VSB) is a statutory body established under the Veterinary Surgeons Registration Ordinance (Cap. 529), and is responsible for the regulation, registration and disciplinary control of veterinary surgeons, to ensure a high standard of veterinary services in Hong Kong. The VSB learns about the overall veterinary services through data gathered in the regulation of the veterinary profession.

The number of registered veterinary surgeons (RVS) has been consistently on the rise since 2015, from 823 in 2015 to 1 364 in April this year, representing an increase of 65 per cent. Moreover, RVS comprises many specialties, such as small animal internal medicine and surgery, dermatology, cardiology, neurology and veterinary pathology. Apart from private veterinary clinics, the City University of Hong Kong and some animal welfare organisations, such as the SPCA, also provide veterinary services, therefore animal owners should be able to find appropriate veterinary services for their pets.

Thank you, President.