

LCQ9: Anti-epidemic measures in public hospitals

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Cheng Chung-tai and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (February 24):

Question:

It has been reported that earlier on, a woman under quarantine who was feeling unwell was arranged to take a test for the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (the test) at a Triage and Test (T&T) Centre set up by erecting tents in the outdoor area of a public hospital, and she was asked to wait there for the test result. Only after that woman had shivered in the outdoor area for almost eight hours under very cold weather was she admitted to the hospital for treatment. In addition, the Hospital Authority (HA) has strongly recommended that patients receiving day services present a negative test report when attending their first scheduled appointments, and patients attending regular follow-up consultations take the test once a week. Some patients have relayed that the fact that some public hospitals do not provide the testing service has caused great inconvenience to them when they attend follow-up consultations. Furthermore, some healthcare personnel have relayed that implementing the anti-epidemic measures has aggravated their heavy workload. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council whether it knows if HA will:

(1) improve the arrangements for the T&T Centres by setting up, during inclement weather, such T&T Centres in hospitals' indoor areas or in nearby community halls; and

(2) provide testing service for all patients receiving day services, and improve the work arrangements for healthcare personnel during the epidemic so as to alleviate their work pressure?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Hospital Authority (HA), I provide a reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon CHENG Chung-tai as follows:

(1) In light of the development of the COVID-19 epidemic, public hospitals under the HA have started setting up Triage and Test (T&T) Centres at their Accident and Emergency Departments (AED) since late March 2020 for conducting tests for suspected cases in relatively stable condition, with a view to relieving pressure on isolation beds in public hospitals. Patients will have their nasopharyngeal swab taken at the AED direct for testing without

admission and will wait for the test results at a designated area. Certain hospitals have designated specific wards as the waiting area while some have set up tents or cubicles outdoors in a well-ventilated environment, which satisfies infection control requirements, for patients to wait for the results. Patients who are tested positive will be admitted to hospitals for isolation and treatment. For public hospitals which have set up outdoor T&T Centre, the HA has reminded them to render assistance to patients as appropriate having regard to the weather condition (e.g. when it gets cold or hot), and allow them to wait indoors, where practicable, for the test results.

(2) Since January 6, 2021, the HA has strengthened testing arrangement for patients attending day care centres and receiving day services. Day patients are strongly advised to obtain a negative result for COVID-19 test within 72 hours prior to the first appointment. Those with regular attendance for day services are recommended to repeat the COVID-19 test on a weekly basis. Patients who will stay in the hospital for less than two hours can be exempted from the testing requirement provided that they would wear surgical masks at all times in the hospital. Public hospitals will arrange for day patients to undergo testing one or two days prior to their appointments, while weekly testing will be arranged for those with regular attendance. Such arrangements will not affect the day services or follow-up consultations.

In addition, the Government has all along been providing convenient testing services to the public through various channels, including free testing service. People who feel they have a higher risk of exposure or are experiencing mild discomfort can obtain deep throat saliva specimen collection packs from any of the 47 designated general outpatient clinics (GOPCs) of the HA, 121 post offices and 20 MTR stations. After obtaining deep throat saliva specimens as per instructions, they shall return the specimens to any of the 47 designated GOPCs of the HA, 13 designated clinics of the Department of Health or designated specimen collection points at 23 government premises. The 19 community testing centres across the territory also provide self-paid testing services to the public for general community or private purposes. In accordance with the epidemic situation and the testing need, the Government also sets up mobile specimen collection stations from time to time at different locations. Patients receiving day services of the HA can also undergo testing through the above channels.

The Government has allocated \$4.7 billion from the first round of the Anti-epidemic Fund to support the HA in tackling the epidemic, in particular for ensuring sufficient support and protection for frontline healthcare staff. The HA has been flexibly deploying the resources on various fronts to combat the epidemic, including personnel-related expenditure for frontline staff involved in anti-epidemic efforts; procuring additional personal protective equipment and other relevant accessories; offering Special Rental Allowance (SRA) and temporary accommodation arrangements; enhancing support for laboratory testing and procuring drug and medical equipment; and enhancing hospital support services, such as cleansing, transportation and supplies, etc.

To further support the HA in combating the winter surge and the fourth wave of the epidemic, and to enhance the capacity of the public healthcare system to manage more new cases, the Government has sought the Legislative Council Finance Committee's approval to allocate \$3,044 million additional funding to the HA for its establishment and operation of Community Treatment Facility at AsiaWorld-Expo and North Lantau Hospital Hong Kong Infection Control Centre. The resources provided would also allow the HA to sustain its current anti-epidemic efforts and support for frontline healthcare staff.

As for manpower support, the HA introduced Special Emergency Response Allowance on February 24, 2020 as a token of appreciation and recognition for staff engaging in high risk duties in response to the COVID-19 epidemic. The HA has also introduced SRA starting from February 1, 2020 for staff working in high risk areas or surveillance wards with temporary accommodation needs. In addition, the HA has set up the Locum Office to recruit part-time staff in a more flexible and efficient manner, and implemented the Special Honorarium Scheme to strengthen manpower with a view to alleviating the pressure on frontline healthcare staff.