

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.

US Dollar Liquidity Facility tender result

The following is issued on behalf of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority:

US Dollar Liquidity Facility tender result

Tender date	:	February 24, 2021 (Wednesday)
Settlement date	:	February 25, 2021 (Thursday)
Repayment date	:	March 4, 2021 (Thursday)
Tenor	:	Seven Days
Amount applied	:	Nil
Amount allotted	:	Nil
Lowest interest rate accepted	:	Nil
Highest interest rate accepted	:	Nil

Hong Kong Public Libraries commends awardees of Reading Programme for Children and Youth

The Reading Programme for Children and Youth, organised by the Hong Kong Public Libraries (HKPL) of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department, has continued to attract an overwhelming response with over 130,000 members this year. Twenty-three members received Star of the Month awards for their reading reports, among which six outstanding pieces were awarded Reading Supernova. Eleven participants in the programme attending the most sessions of the Monthly Meeting of Joyful Reading were awarded Elite of Joyful Reading medals.

The HKPL is committed to promoting reading and hopes that schools can encourage students to register for the programme. The five schools that successfully nominated the largest number of members in the year, namely the Church of Christ in China Chuen Yuen Second Primary School, Po Leung Kuk Lee Shu Fook Kindergarten, Hong Kong Southern District Government Primary School, St Charles School and Hon Wah College, were presented with Most Active School in Promoting Participation awards.

Five schools with the highest total number of books read by their nominated members won the Most Active School in Promoting Reading awards. The winning schools are W F Joseph Lee Primary School, Hong Kong Baptist Convention Primary School, HKMLC Ming Tao Primary School, SKH Yan Laap Primary School and SKH Tin Wan Chi Nam Primary School.

The Reading Programme aims at raising the reading interest of children and youth from kindergarten to Secondary Six, cultivating their reading habits, and sharing their reading tips and the joy of reading. To promote paired reading, children from kindergarten to Primary Three can join the family category with their parents. People interested in participating in the Reading Programme may contact any public library or visit www.hkpl.gov.hk/rp.

LCQ8: Three-runway system

Following is a question by the Hon Michael Tien and a written reply by the Secretary for Transport and Housing, Mr Frank Chan Fan, in the Legislative Council today (February 24):

Question:

The Chief Executive stated in the 2020 Policy Address that the Airport Authority Hong Kong would, as originally planned, commission the third runway and the entire three-runway system (3RS) in 2022 and 2024 respectively. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective forecasts, made by the Government when it approved in principle the construction of 3RS in 2012, on Hong Kong's long-term air traffic demand (i.e. the annual number of air traffic movements at the Hong Kong International Airport) (i) in 2030 and (ii) after 2030;

(2) of the maximum number of air traffic movements that 3RS can handle annually upon its commissioning, as forecasted by the Government in 2012; and

(3) of the time, as anticipated by the Government in 2012 on the basis of the forecasts mentioned in (1) and (2), when the handling capacity of 3RS will reach its full capacity?

Reply:

President,

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government is committed to consolidating and enhancing Hong Kong's status as an international aviation hub. In March 2012, the Executive Council (ExCo) approved in principle the recommendation of the Airport Authority Hong Kong (AAHK) to adopt the Three-Runway System (3RS) as the future development direction for Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA). In March 2015, the ExCo advised and the Chief Executive affirmed the need for the 3RS project at HKIA to cater for the long-term economic and development needs of Hong Kong. Thereafter, AAHK commenced construction of the 3RS in August 2016.

According to the estimates of an international air traffic expert commissioned by the AAHK during the planning stage of the 3RS, the annual traffic demand of HKIA would reach 97 million passengers, 8.9 million tonnes of cargo and 602 000 air traffic movements (ATM) by 2030.

According to the estimates available at the time, upon the commissioning of the 3RS, the runway capacity of HKIA would increase progressively to the maximum of 102 ATMs per hour; the practical maximum annual capacity of the 3RS would be about 620 000 ATMs.

As the AAHK plans for the long-term development of HKIA, the 3RS is one of the major projects to address the growing demand for air traffic in Hong Kong. To cater for long-term air traffic demand, as noted in the AAHK's report titled "From City Airport to Airport City", the AAHK will enhance the handling capacity of HKIA through a series of measures and development projects. The relevant report can be viewed on the following website: www.hongkongairport.com/en/airport-authority/publications/airport-city-report.page.

In view of the impact of the pandemic and the rapid changes in the

current market environment, a continuous planning process for HKIA is needed. The AAHK will continue to closely monitor market changes in order to formulate its long-term development strategy.

LCQ13: Alleviating burden of tax

Following is a question by the Hon Starry Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury, Mr Christopher Hui, in the Legislative Council today (February 24):

Question:

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 epidemic has dealt a heavy blow to Hong Kong's economy, resulting in quite a number of employees earning substantially less income and even being out of a job, as well as quite a number of enterprises making substantially less profits and even closing down. On the other hand, taxpayers with financial difficulties may apply to the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) for payment of tax by instalments. The Government has implemented the following temporary arrangements: for those taxpayers who have been approved on grounds of financial difficulties to settle by instalments their salaries tax, profits tax and personal assessment demand notes issued between August 2020 and August 2021 for the year of assessment 2019-2020, surcharge may be waived for a maximum period of one year counting from the respective due dates of the demand notes, provided that they settle all the instalment payments on schedule. In addition, if taxpayers anticipate that there will be a decrease of more than 10 per cent in their net chargeable income or assessable profits for the current year of assessment, they may apply to the IRD for holding over part of or the whole of the provisional tax. Such holding over arrangement applies to salaries tax, profits tax and property tax. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) of the respective numbers of applications received by the IRD up to the end of last month for (a) payment by instalments of (i) salaries tax, (ii) profits tax and (iii) property tax for the year of assessment 2019-2020, and (b) holding over of provisional tax in respect of those three taxes for the year of assessment 2020-2021; how these figures compare to the relevant figures of the same period last year;

(2) regarding the respective applications for (a) payment of tax by instalments and (b) holding over of provisional tax mentioned in (1), of the respective total amounts of (i) salaries tax, (ii) profits tax and (iii) property tax involved; among these cases, the respective largest amounts of tax and provisional tax involved in respect of those three taxes, and the respective occupations and trades in which the applicants concerned were engaged; and

(3) whether it has examined new measures to help relieve the burden of tax on those employees with decreased income and those companies with dropped profits, such as allowing companies with dropped profits to defer the payment of profits tax for one year, or reducing the tax rates concerned, so that they could have more operating funds?

Reply:

President,

My response to each part of the Member's question is set out below:

On parts (1) to (2) of the question

For taxpayers with financial difficulties who were approved by the Inland Revenue Department (IRD) for instalment settlement of their salaries tax, profits tax and personal assessment demand notes issued between December 2019 and December 2020 for the year of assessment (YA) 2018/19, or those issued between August 2020 and August 2021 for the YA 2019/20, no surcharge will be imposed (Note) for a maximum period of one year counting from the respective due dates of the demand notes, provided that the instalment plans are duly adhered to.

Statistics on the instalment plans approved for settlement of tax for the YA 2019/20 from August 2020 to January this year are as follows:

Payment by instalments	Number of cases	Amount of tax involved (\$million)
Salaries tax	1 280	184
Profits tax	150	1,037
Personal assessment	50	6

Statistics on the instalment plans approved for settlement of tax for the YA 2018/19 from December 2019 to January this year are as follows:

Payment by instalments	Number of cases	Amount of tax involved (\$million)
Salaries tax	5 000	730
Profits tax	870	1,837
Personal assessment	130	9

As some taxpayers may have yet to submit their applications for payment by instalments for the YA 2019/20, a direct comparison cannot be made between the figures concerned and those recorded in the previous year.

The IRD also provides for a holding over arrangement of provisional tax. Taxpayers anticipating a decrease of more than 10 per cent in their net chargeable income or assessable profits for the current YA may apply for holding over the whole or part of the provisional tax.

The number of approved applications for holding over of provisional tax from April 2020 to January this year, and the amount of tax involved are as follows:

Holding over of provisional tax	Number of cases	Amount of tax involved (\$million)
Salaries tax	89 800	4,454
Profits tax	6 700	21,419
Property tax	5 100	95

The number of approved applications for holding over of provisional tax for the financial year (FY) 2019-20, and the amount of tax involved are as follows:

Holding over of provisional tax	Number of cases	Amount of tax involved (\$million)
Salaries tax	47 200	3,564
Profits tax	6 100	16,766
Property tax	3 000	47

Since the Inland Revenue (Amendment) (Tax Concessions) Bill 2019 was only passed in November 2019, taxpayers received their tax bills for the YA 2019/20 later than usual. Thus, the number of applications for holding over of provisional tax for the FY 2019-20 cannot be directly compared with that recorded in this year.

Pursuant to section 4 of the Inland Revenue Ordinance on official secrecy, the IRD must not disclose information of individual taxpayers.

On part (3) of the question

With a view to helping hard-hit business sectors and individuals tide over the difficult times, the Government has introduced a series of measures since early 2020 amounting to over \$300 billion through the 2020-21 Budget and four rounds of injections into the Anti-epidemic Fund to relieve the financial pressure of businesses and individuals.

As mentioned in the response to the first two parts of the question, businesses and individuals may make use of the tax instalment payment and

holding over of provisional tax arrangements to improve their cash flow. Salaries tax and profits tax are key sources of government revenue. When assessing any related proposals, the Government will take into consideration a range of factors, including the overall economic situation, the Government's fiscal position, and the needs of the community. The new Budget will maintain a counter-cyclical fiscal policy, with appropriate measures to alleviate the impact of the economic downturn on people's livelihood and to lay the foundation for economic recovery from the epidemic.

Note: Taxpayers paying property tax may also apply for payment of tax by instalments, but the waiver of surcharge is not applicable to them. About 60 applications (involving \$4.2 million) and 80 applications (involving \$3.9 million) for payment of property tax by instalments were recorded in the financial years of 2019-20 and 2020-21 (by the end of January 2021) respectively.