

Transcript of remarks by SCS, SFH and DoH at media session (with video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Secretary for the Civil Service, Mr Patrick Nip; the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; and the Director of Health, Dr Constance Chan, on the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme at a media session this afternoon (March 24):

Reporter: First, can the authorities tell us the exact time that you guys got the written notice from Fosun this morning and why was there a delayed announcement when Macao who is experiencing the same problem can make an announcement two hours before Hong Kong did? Would the authorities apologise to those who still got up for BioNTech jabs this morning despite this situation? Second question, can the authorities tell us what is the exact issue when you are talking about packaging defects and does this packaging design contain other features to prevent possible contamination? According to your understanding, do you have, like, a preliminary reason that you think is a possible cause? Is it to do with the temperature change during the thawing process or due to the logistic issues? Third question, are you concerned that this will deter people from getting a jab when public confidence over vaccination here in Hong Kong is already not quite high?

Secretary for the Civil Service: I will answer your first question and then I will invite the Director to answer the remaining questions. We received the written notification from Fosun Pharma this morning. In Hong Kong's situation, we have two batches of BioNTech vaccines. Upon receipt of the written notification, colleagues made liaison with the Fosun Pharma to confirm and understand the situation, and then notified the vaccination centres about the suspension of BioNTech vaccination and then we issued the press release to make the formal announcement at around 10am. We received the written notification this morning. We immediately took the necessary follow-up actions. Because of the amount of vaccines, and also more than one batch of vaccines are involved, we obviously will take time to liaise with Fosun Pharma to confirm the situation and the understanding before we implement the suspension action. As the written notification was received this morning, there are bound to be that people made the booking this morning or today, and then arrived at the vaccination centre and found out that the vaccination was suspended. So we issued a written SMS notification to all who have made the booking today and let them know about the latest arrangements. We apologise for any inconvenience caused but we have done all we can to minimise the inconvenience caused.

Reporter: What was the exact time ...

Secretary for the Civil Service: I will not talk about the details of chronology but we can tell you that we received the written notification this morning, and there was very limited time for us to act before the centres opened for operation.

Director of Health: All along, we have a very robust system to monitor the vaccination programme. As I mentioned earlier, Hong Kong has imported two batches of BioNTech vaccine. The first one (Batch No. 210102) of 585 000 doses received on February 28 and the second (Batch No. 210104) received on March 7 which comprises 758 000 doses.

All along, we monitor the situation, and from time to time we received report from our front line on any observations. As far as this case is concerned, we have received information related to, for example, cracks in the container, there were eight cases; there were reports on leakage due to overpressure inside the vial and leakage of normal saline upon dilution, there were 22 such reports; there were 16 reports related to loose caps; and there were 11 reports related to stains or marks on the outside of the bottles.

We took all these referrals very seriously and, under the established mechanism, we will ask the agent in Hong Kong, i.e. Fosun in this case, and they will in turn inform the manufacturer BioNTech, whose manufacturing plant is located in Germany.

Upon receipt of the written notification from BioNTech this morning, they advised us that at present there is no evidence which led to any risk related to vaccine safety. However, as a precautionary measure, BioNTech requested us to suspend the use of batch 210102 until the investigation is complete. At the same time, the other batch, i.e. 210104, is currently in the warehouse and is not yet used. As a precautionary measure, BioNTech also requested Hong Kong to put on hold the use of the second batch. We have arranged an urgent meeting with Fosun this morning and according to their risk management plan, they will conduct investigation in Hong Kong, mainly focused on the logistic chain, the transport, the handling and the delivery to the vaccination centres to see if there is any issue. At the same time, they will also liaise with BioNTech to conduct inspections to the manufacturing plant in Germany to ascertain whether or not there is any issue there. Until the investigation is completed, we shall put on hold the vaccination service of the BioNTech vaccine.

Secretary for Food and Health: Regarding your question on vaccine confidence, I would like to say a few words. First of all, it is important for us to have open and transparent information for the public, so that they know the detailed information on the vaccine that they select. Secondly, we have robust mechanisms, not only on reporting or notification of the adverse events, and also having the expert committee to look at or to find out whether there is causality regarding the adverse events and vaccination. We also have a robust mechanism in monitoring the drugs. This time is an example of our reporting mechanism. The Director of Health has reported to the manufacturer, which then called for an investigation. Now, for a precautionary measure, they suspend the vaccination. So, the system is in place, and it is robust. There will be continuous monitoring. Finally, with the existing mechanism, all the vaccines that we have authorised for emergency use are safe, efficacious and also of required quality. This time

is the packaging issue as requested by the manufacturer to suspend the vaccination. As Patrick (the Secretary for the Civil Service) has earlier reported, the Sinovac vaccination is not affected, so the Sinovac vaccination will continue in the eight Community Vaccination Centres, the 18 General Out-patient Clinics as well as all the general practitioners who have opted for joining the Government's vaccination programme.

Reporter: Can the Government get AstraZeneca earlier than scheduled, or is it looking into procuring other brands? What would be your recommendation to people who have already taken the first dose of BioNTech? Would you recommend that they take Sinovac as their second dose?

Secretary for Food and Health: First of all, as far as AstraZeneca is concerned, we have signed the advanced purchase agreement with them and the delivery date is within the second quarter. Our most updated information is still this time. We will continue to communicate with AstraZeneca as to the delivery date. About the question of taking the first dose, the Director of Health has earlier said in Chinese about the recommendation of the joint scientific committee – perhaps I will invite the Director of Health to provide details.

Director of Health: I would like to supplement that we have not yet received the application for authorisation for AstraZeneca's vaccine and we will closely monitor the situation including to scrutinise the most updated data to be provided by the applicant in due course. As for the dosage of BioNTech, the recommended second dose is scheduled for the 21st day. We are aware that there is a chance that the investigation report to be conducted by BioNTech – we hope they can submit to us as soon as possible, but in the event that it cannot provide the full investigation to us in time before we start administering the second dose, we would recommend to those who have received the first dose to wait for our further announcement because we do not recommend people to receive a second dose of a different brand. So please wait for announcement by the Government. Just now you asked about using another brand, maybe you are referring to some research ongoing by the university but that is on a research basis, that is not for the routine administration. So please wait for the government announcement. We will issue the announcement as soon as we can.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)