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Legislative Council Panel on Health Services

Latest SARS Situation in the Mainland and Preventive Measures Taken in Hong Kong

Purpose

This paper provides an update on the latest situation of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in the Mainland and the preventive measures taken in Hong Kong.

Latest SARS Situation in China

2. The Department of Health (DH) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) received notification from the Mainland Ministry of Health (MoH) about two suspected SARS cases, one in Beijing and the other in Anhui Province, on 22 April. On 23 April, MoH notified DH that the two suspected cases were diagnosed as confirmed cases, and there were two more suspected cases. As of 28 April, the number of confirmed cases remained at two and there were altogether seven suspected cases in the Mainland (six in Beijing and one in Anhui Province). To date, all diagnosed cases and cases under investigation have been linked to chains of transmission involving close personal contact with an identified case. Joint investigation between the World Health Organization and Mainland authorities will continue.

Communications with the Mainland

3. Since the SARS outbreak last year, DH has been maintaining close contact with MoH. DH has been receiving timely and regular reports from MoH on the SARS situation in the Mainland. There are also frequent exchanges between the Mainland and HKSAR health officials on the latest situation in the Mainland and preventive measures taken on both sides.

4. In this connection, Mrs Carrie Yau (Permanent Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food), Dr PY Leung (Controller, Centre for Health Protection (CHP)), and Dr Wilina Lim (Consultant in charge of Pathology Service in DH) met with MoH officials in Beijing on 28 April. MoH officials updated the HKSAR delegation on the latest developments of the SARS cases in Beijing and Anhui Province and the preventive measures taken to control the spread of the disease. The HKSAR delegation also briefed MoH on the preventive measures taken in Hong Kong, especially the measures taken at the border control points and those by the tourism industry to prepare for the large number of Mainland visitors anticipated during the Labour Day Golden Week. Both sides also exchanged views and experience on enhancement of laboratory safety.

Preventive Measures Taken in Hong Kong

5. The SARS Alert Level¹ was activated in the evening of 23 April shortly after the confirmation by MoH of the two confirmed SARS cases. At the same time, the Hospital Authority (HA) also activated the Yellow Alert. An emergency response command structure involving senior officials from the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB), DH and HA has been set up to monitor the developments closely and decide on appropriate actions in anticipation of developments.

6. The Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food (SHWF) chaired an inter-departmental meeting² on 26 April to review the preventive measures taken and called on relevant government departments to heighten their alertness and preparedness, particularly in view of the likely surge of

¹ To ensure expeditious and effective interventions for various SARS emergencies, a three-level response system is in place:

- Alert Level is activated when there is a laboratory-confirmed SARS case outside Hong Kong or a SARS Alert in Hong Kong;
- Level 1 is activated when there are one or more laboratory-confirmed SARS cases in Hong Kong occurring in a sporadic manner; and
- Level 2 is activated when there are signs of local transmission of the disease.

² Representatives of bureaux, departments and agencies at the meeting were Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, Department of Health, Hospital Authority, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Social Welfare Department, Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, Tourism Commission, Education and Manpower Bureau and Home Affairs Department.

Mainland visitors to Hong Kong in the coming week or so. Relevant departments agreed to re-circulate their guidelines to relevant institutions such as elderly homes and travel agencies to remind them to be on guard. They should also enhance publicity on personal hygiene and environmental cleanliness. The prevailing and enhanced SARS prevention measures are set out below.

Enhanced Border Control

- Health declarations and temperature screening checks for travellers at all border control points are maintained.
- DH has deployed extra port health staff to distribute health information leaflets and health alert cards to travellers arriving from Beijing and Hefei (Anhui Province) by air and those from Beijing by rail. Staff will watch out for sick people among these travellers.
- Health information leaflets are also distributed to departing travellers to Beijing and Hefei by air and those to Beijing by rail.
- Operators of all inbound flights from these two places and through-trains from Beijing have been asked to broadcast relevant health messages to the passengers.

Enhance Disease Surveillance

- DH and HA have set up a surveillance system to monitor patients with pneumonia who have a history of travel to Beijing or Anhui Province during the 10 days before the onset of symptoms.
- DH has notified public and private hospitals, general practitioners, Chinese medicine practitioners, healthcare professionals including those working in laboratories to remain vigilant and to pass information about any patients with pneumonia symptoms and with history of travel to Beijing and Anhui Province to DH to facilitate contact tracing and analysis. DH also keeps these institutions and

professionals up-to-date about the disease situation in the Mainland.

- DH has also been offering free SARS diagnostic tests to private hospitals to ensure efficient identification of the disease.

Preventive Measures in Hospitals

- DH and HA continue to work closely in the sharing of information as well as preparation and implementation of various contingency measures.
- HA has reminded all Accident & Emergency Departments and out-patient clinics to stay alert to any patients who have fever and respiratory disease symptoms and who have recent travel history to Beijing and the Anhui Province.
- The existing visiting arrangements for hospital patients in terms of visiting hours (maximum of four hours for acute awards, six hours for convalescent and infirmary wards) and number of visitors (two at a time for each patient) are maintained. Visitors to wards are required to register.
- The existing level of personal protective equipment for healthcare workers has been reviewed and is considered sufficient. The existing infection control measures at public hospitals, including triage of fever patients with epidemiological link at Accident & Emergency Departments and isolation wards will continue.
- All healthcare workers and visitors to hospitals are required to wear surgical masks in all patient care areas.
- HA has implemented a monitoring system of staff on sick leave so that it will be alerted early to a cluster of staff falling sick with specific symptoms (e.g. fever and respiratory disease) to prevent the spread of infection in hospitals.

Laboratory Safety

- In light of recent experience in the Mainland, Controller, CHP, Dr PY Leung convened a meeting on 27 April with representatives from DH, HA and the universities to review laboratory safety in Hong Kong and ways to further enhance safety measures, with a view to better protecting the health of the laboratory personnel and preventing spillage of SARS virus. At present, there are a total of eight laboratories in six locations involved in SARS virus testing, and two of them, which are at Biosafety level 3 (i.e. P3), are engaged in live SARS virus research.
- Laboratory representatives at the meeting agreed to review their safety practice, ensure all laboratory personnel to remain vigilant, and receive all necessary training. All laboratory work should also be undertaken at the appropriate biocontainment level. Staff involved in handling SARS virus who have fallen sick will be closely monitored to minimize risk.
- All personnel of P3 laboratories are reminded to inform DH promptly of any incident/accident of spillage and personal infection occurred during laboratory work involving SARS virus.
- In line with the recommendations of World Health Organization, DH will maintain a registry of laboratories that are committed to safely and securely holding and working with SARS virus infected and/or potentially infected materials.

Measures for the Labour Day Golden Week

- In view of the coming Labour Day Golden Week, which is typically a peak time for travel to Hong Kong by Mainland visitors, in addition to the aforementioned border point control measures, the Tourism Commission has been in close liaison with the travel trade to keep them updated on the latest developments, and remind them of the need to remain vigilant and adhere to DH's guidelines. The

Tourism Commission has also touch-based with the Guangdong Provincial Tourism Authority, encouraging them to remind their visitors to be vigilant of personal hygiene and health conditions while traveling abroad.

- The Tourism Commission has specifically written to the Travel Industry Council, to remind travel agents handling Mainland tour groups to enhance precautionary measures. Travel agents/travel guides are required to monitor the body temperature of tour group members coming from Beijing and Anhui during their stay in Hong Kong. They should also promptly arrange medical consultation for any tour group members with fever symptoms during their stay and inform relevant parties promptly, according to DH's guidelines.
- The Travel Industry Council has helped to disseminate information to the travel trade, which has been reminded of the requirement to comply with guidelines issued by DH and to take appropriate precautionary measures to protect visitors' health. DH will continue to closely monitor the situation, inform the tourism sector of the latest developments and provide appropriate health advice as necessary.

Communication with the Public

- DH will continue to maintain close contact with MoH in order to ensure timely receipt of information and to respond accordingly. DH provides a SARS hotline (187 2222) to answer public enquiries in relation to SARS.
- DH will step up publicity work, reminding the public to maintain good personal hygiene and pay attention to their health.

Next Step

7. The Administration has been in close liaison with MoH regarding the latest SARS situation in the Mainland. We will continue to

maintain this close link, and will remain vigilant and keep our preventive measures under constant review. HWFB will closely monitor the situation and implementation of various response actions. To ensure the Administration is fully prepared in case of occurrence of a SARS case in Hong Kong, the Controller, CHP convened an inter-departmental meeting on 29 April to review the contingency measures that will be called for in the event of a higher Alert Level.

8. Members are requested to note the content of this paper.

Heath, Welfare and Food Bureau
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