

Panel on Health Services

Special meeting on 27 November 2003

Inter-departmental meeting reviews measures against gastroenteritis outbreaks

In an inter-departmental meeting today (November 26), representatives from various government departments and health sector discussed the recent outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis in Hong Kong and pledged full support to make continuous joint efforts to control the disease.

The meeting was co-chaired by the Director of Health, Dr Lam Ping-yan and the Deputy Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, Mr Thomas Yiu. It was attended by representatives from 10 other government bureaux/departments and agencies - Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), Social Welfare Department (SWD), Hospital Authority (HA), Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), Home Affairs Department (HAD), Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD), Housing Department (HD), Transport Department (TD), Information Services Department (ISD) and the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

At today's meeting, participants noted there had been a rise in the number of infections outbreaks involving viral gastroenteritis in recent weeks. As of November 25 this year, DH has received reports of gastroenteritis outbreaks confirmed or suspected to be caused by Norovirus affecting 1 237 persons. The full-year totals for 2001 and 2002 were 678 and 892 respectively.

"Epidemiological evidence suggests that virus causing gastroenteritis are particularly active in cooler months. As we are in the middle of the peak season for this high infectious disease, we need to step up efforts on all fronts to prevent large outbreaks from happening," a spokesman for the inter-departmental meeting said.

"Effective prevention and control of the disease would depend on prompt identification and notification of suspected cases by schools, kindergartens and child care

centres where the majority of the recent outbreaks had occurred."

The spokesman said DH, supported by EMB and SWD, had been communicating the importance of early detection of symptomatic cases to these institutions through advisory letters, seminars and health talks, adding that these institutions had to designate an officer to report even suspected cases to DH.

DH had also provided guidance to identify the clinical features of common infections and set up a hotline (2961 8966) manned by nurses. It had also organized four seminars for school principals to address their concerns and enlist their cooperation in reporting and managing outbreaks.

Meanwhile, DH had appealed for prompt notification of outbreaks by private health care service providers to facilitate expeditious epidemiological investigations and control actions. It had also pledged to initiate investigations for each reported outbreak within 24 hours of notification.

On infection control, HA had reminded health care workers in public hospitals of the possible modes of transmission of Norovirus and Rotavirus and the personal protection equipment and practices required to prevent relevant infections in hospital settings. HA has been in close collaboration with DH to report any clustering of gastroenteritis cases.

Similarly, DH had stepped up liaison with institutions with reported infections to ensure that their teachers, health care workers and other frontline staff were properly protected whilst carrying out daily routines.

Recognising that Norovirus could be transmitted by contaminated food/water or contacts with vomits, faeces or aerosols from infected persons, the spokesman said the meeting supported extending the control measures beyond the hospital and institutional settings.

"For effective control of the disease, the battle against viral gastroenteritis would need to be fought on the broader front, involving more departments and different sectors of the community," the spokesman said.

The spokesman said FEHD would strengthen health education for food handlers on prevention of food incidents

in winter time, notably through the launch of a special campaign against viral gastroenteritis in two phases from December 1, 2003.

"FEHD and DH will also step up their publicity effort to promote healthy eating habits by members of the public, including advice on thorough cooking of food items likely to carry the viruses such as seafood and shellfish," the spokesman said.

At today's meeting, participants also acknowledged the maintenance of a clean environment as an essential control measure for gastroenteritis. They reaffirmed the need to press ahead with the longer-term measures to improve environmental hygiene as enshrined in Team Clean's report released in early August. They agreed to redouble efforts to enhance the hygiene conditions of premises, venues and/or vehicles under their control.

As the support and involvement of the community were vital in the early control of infectious diseases, the spokesman said HAD would encourage local organizations, including the 18 District Clean Hong Kong Committees and building management agencies, to step up publicity and cleansing activities to prevent and control viral gastroenteritis.

To supplement the wide-ranging publicity avenues (e.g. newspaper health columns, TV programmes, interviews and webpages) in place, more airtime be earmarked by ISD for broadcast of radio/TV APIs on how to prevent possible gastroenteritis infections.

In addition, the meeting supported more collaboration between DH, HA and local universities on applied researches to uncover more epidemiological and clinical characteristics of Norovirus and Rotavirus given the public health significance they pose to the community.

"The inter-departmental meeting will closely follow developments on the outbreak situations. Members will keep the effectiveness of newly introduced measures under review and will meet again to discuss further control measures if necessary," the spokesman said.

End/Wednesday, November 26, 2003
NNNN