

SHWF responds to SARS Expert Committee report

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Following is the transcript of remarks made by the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, Dr Yeoh Eng-kiong, in response to the SARS Expert Committee report at a stand-up media session at the Conference Hall, first floor, Central Government Offices New Annexe today (October 2):

The SARS Expert Committee has thoroughly reviewed what had happened before and during the SARS outbreak earlier this year in Hong Kong. The report has made invaluable and far-reaching recommendations on how our systems and facilities can be improved so that we can better prepare ourselves and guard against a resurgence of the disease. I would like to thank all the expert members for devoting their time and expertise, and for their very substantial contributions to the protection of public health in Hong Kong.

I would now like to say a few words to the citizens of Hong Kong.

The SARS outbreak was a very tragic experience for all of us in Hong Kong, and a very painful experience for many people who lost their loved ones. I remain deeply saddened by the deaths caused by the outbreak. And I would like to offer once again my deepest condolences to those who have lost loved ones and to those who have suffered adversity as a consequence of the disease.

The experts' report has pointed out that because little was known about a new virus during the initial stages of the outbreak, our health care system was not well prepared to tackle a disease outbreak of this size and nature. I offer my deepest and most sincere apology to the people of Hong Kong, the deceased, family members of the deceased, individuals who were infected and to all health care workers, for the inability of the health care system to comprehensively halt the spread of the disease in the early stages, and for any misunderstandings I might have caused in communicating with the public.

I accept the report in its entirety. As a Principal Official under the Accountability System, the deficiencies exposed in our health care system ultimately fall on my shoulders, and I accept that responsibility fully.

I have given much and very serious thought as to whether I should resign to realise this spirit of accountability. In our fight against the disease, time and again I have done much soul-searching.

I can vividly recall our deep sadness during the outbreak when we witnessed many people, including our health care sector colleagues, falling ill with the virus. We all knew that we had to act very quickly to improve the system and to control the spread of the disease. My colleagues and I worked around the clock and did all that was humanly possible and sometimes even humanly remotely possible to fight this new and unknown disease and, at the same time, rectify any deficiencies and shortfalls in the system. The Expert Committee recognises the effectiveness of these efforts in this respect.

Hong Kong's dense population and, the ease at which people come and go from our city, makes us extremely susceptible to the threat and full impact of new infectious diseases such as SARS. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to transform our disease surveillance system, prevention and control system.

As the experts' report notes, the most important lesson of our SARS experience is to be better prepared for possible resurgence of the disease in the winter months. In the past months, my colleagues and I have worked unremittingly to build up comprehensive prevention, close surveillance and swift control measures. We have also been working closely with different sectors and trade in the community, and enlisted their help, to maintain a high level of preparedness against SARS. As a result of the 46 very comprehensive and far-reaching recommendations contained in the report, much work remains to be done. These tasks need to be undertaken proactively and quickly, including the setting up of a centre for health protection.

The SARS experience has been a very humbling one and I am determined to assimilate the lessons learnt. In the coming days, I will take forward the experts' advice and listen to the views of the community with an open mind. I will do all I can to improve the health care system, to protect public health and to make sure that the system is fully prepared to tackle SARS and other infectious diseases. I will realise the spirit of accountability by meeting all these challenges and by continuing to serve the public.

End/Thursday, October 2, 2003

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