

HWFB's statement on HA's SARS report

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The following is the statement by the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) in response to the report of the Hospital Authority Review Panel on the SARS Outbreak:

The HWFB has received a copy of the Report of the Hospital Authority Review Panel on the SARS Outbreak.

We note that the Report contains 45 recommendations. We are studying the recommendations in detail. We welcome any recommendation that will further help the Hospital Authority (HA) and the Government to enhance the system capacity of preventing and combating infectious diseases. Our initial observation is that some of the recommendations, such as improvements to isolation facilities in hospitals and maintaining a suitable stock of personal protective equipment for health care workers, have already been implemented.

We understand that the HA Board has taken the view that the Panel had not carried out the process of verification of facts with some interested parties concerned and/or given these parties a reasonable opportunity to respond or comment before the finalisation of the Report.

The Board also takes the view that for those parties outside the remit of the Panel's Terms of Reference, the limitations were more obvious and may lead to questions regarding the validity of some of its findings.

We note that there are a significant number of comments and conclusions in the Report that relate to the Government, particularly HWFB and Department of Health (DH). We are uncertain as to how the Report came to formulate comments and conclusions on HWFB and DH, as the remit given by the Board to the Panel is for the review to focus on how HA has managed and responded to the SARS outbreak, and there was limited contact between the Panel and HWFB, and between the Panel and DH in the review process.

It is evident that there are limitations in the process by which the Panel came to comments and conclusions with regard to parties outside the remit given to the Panel by the Board. We appreciate that this might be due to the short timeframe

within which the Report had to be completed.

We have pointed out the limitations we observed to the HA Board including -

\* The nature and process of the review was such that key information relating to the Government's actions had not all been assembled by the Panel. As a result, some of the comments and conclusions made of the Government in the Report are questionable.

\* In the review process, neither HWFB nor DH has been asked by the Panel to confirm the "facts" referred to in the Report or to provide further relevant information for the Panel's attention.

\* We have also not been given an opportunity to make our representations on the Panel's observations and comments as a matter of procedural fairness. It appears to us that the due process of verification of facts with the parties concerned and giving the parties concerned a reasonable opportunity to respond has not been carried out.

\* Some of the facts quoted in the Report are different from those provided by DH. We also observed that in some areas in the Report, relevant information could have been provided by the parties concerned had they been given the opportunity to do so. Such process and the provision of relevant information would have led to a more complete and accurate account and might lead to different conclusions.

\* The Report has made comments and drawn conclusions with the benefit of hindsight and not based on the knowledge and information available at the particular time.

\* Some of the judgements in the Report were made without regard to the whole picture of all the communications between the Government and the community. In some other cases, the judgements were made on the basis of the Panel's interpretation of one or two statements alone, and taken out of context.

As an example of the questionable comments and conclusions, the Report mentioned that there was "the absence of a clear chain of command" and "no central decision making body", while in fact in the early stage of the epidemic, a number of measures were taken by the Government to delineate a clear chain of command, including the establishment of the HWFB Task Force and the Chief Executive's Steering Committee. The Report did not mention any of these bodies. The comment that there

was no clear chain of command/no central decision-making body was unjustified.

Despite our reservations over the validity of these comments and conclusions, we will work closely together with the HA Board and HA management to implement the recommendations of the Report that will help us to better prevent infectious diseases and deal with an infectious disease outbreak.

End/Thursday, October 16, 2003

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