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By Fax (2840 0467)
10 February 2006

Dr York CHOW Yat-ngok, SBS, JP
Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food
8th floor, West Wing
Central Government Offices
11 Ice House Street
Central
Hong Kong

Dear Dr CHOW,

Panel on Health Services

Notification of infectious diseases between the Mainland and Hong Kong

At the meeting of the Panel on Health Services (the Panel) on 9 January 2006, the Administration briefed members on the notification of infectious diseases between the Mainland and Hong Kong. The Panel notes that the criteria for laboratory confirmation of influenza A (H5N1) infections used in the Mainland are more stringent than those recommended by the World Health Organisation in its latest guideline on laboratory tests to identify avian influenza virus in specimens from humans. In the Mainland, an extra test is required to confirm a human influenza A (H5N1) infection case tested by a local laboratory. A longer time of about three to four weeks has therefore been taken for notification of a confirmed case by the Mainland. The Panel is concerned about the increased risk to Hong Kong in the interim, in view of the heavy cross-border traffic between Hong Kong and the Mainland.

On behalf of the Panel, I am writing to request you to convey the Panel's concern to the Mainland Ministry of Health and the Health Department of the Guangdong Province and explore with them on the possibility of -

- (a) notifying Hong Kong of all suspected cases of infectious diseases prior to laboratory confirmation of such cases; and
- (b) putting in place an electronic platform to facilitate Hong Kong to communicate direct with health authorities at provincial level in the Mainland about infectious disease outbreaks and incidents.

I look forward to your early reply to the Panel's requests.

Yours sincerely,

(KWOK Ka-ki)
Chairman
Legislative Council Panel on Health Services



中華人民共和國香港特別行政區政府總部衛生福利及食物局
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The People's Republic of China

Our ref.: HWF CR 3/3921/03 Pt.9
Your ref.: CB2/PL/HS

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16 March 2006

Dr the Honourable Kwok Ka-ki
Chairman
Legislative Council Panel on Health Services
Legislative Council Building
8 Jackson Road
Central
Hong Kong

Dear Chairman,

Panel on Health Services
Notification of infectious diseases between the Mainland and Hong Kong

Dr York Chow, the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food, has asked me to thank you for your letter dated 10 February 2006 and reply on his behalf.

We note the concern of the Panel on Health Services on the infectious disease notification arrangement between the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and the Mainland. As explained at the Panel meeting on 9 January 2006, we have established various communication channels with our Mainland counterparts with a view to ensuring prompt notification and response against infectious disease outbreaks. We have set up direct point-to-point communication systems with both the Mainland Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Health Department of the Guangdong Province (HDGP) for timely exchange of information about major infectious disease outbreaks and incidence of diseases of significant public health concern. We also exchange regular infectious disease information with the two parties on a monthly basis. These notification and information

exchange mechanisms have been working smoothly and serve us well.

On the specific proposals set out in the second paragraph of your letter, we note that the relevant requirements in respect of laboratory confirmation of human cases of avian influenza H5N1 in the Mainland is in line with the World Health Organization (WHO)'s recommendations. The WHO has advised that any specimens with a positive result for avian influenza in one laboratory should be further tested and verified by a designated laboratory assessed by the WHO to have acceptable standards (for instance, the national reference laboratory in Beijing in the Mainland). You may wish to note that it is not a requirement for the WHO on countries to report all suspected cases of infectious diseases without laboratory confirmation. To our knowledge, no country adopts this practice. As regards the electronic communication platform, we understand from the MoH that there is no general arrangement in place for the sharing of infectious disease information among all provincial health authorities through a common electronic platform.

As explained at the Panel meeting, we have been devoting a great deal of efforts in exploring with the MoH and the HDGP possible ways for expanding our surveillance network for infectious disease outbreaks in the Mainland and enhancing the flexibility of our notification mechanism. Significant progress has been made in this regard. For example, our public health experts were invited to participate in investigations for major infectious disease outbreaks in the Mainland last year, namely the human infections of *Streptococcus suis* and avian influenza in the Sichuan and Hunan Province respectively. In this connection, a consultant from the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health also participated as an honorary consultant in a WHO expert team to help investigate pneumonia cases with unknown causes in the Hunan Province. Through these joint efforts, we obtained timely first-hand information about these outbreaks. Another notable example is that, on 3 March (Friday) this year, the MoH and the HDGP notified the CHP about a suspected human avian influenza case in Guangzhou, having regard to the public health significance of avian influenza. Subsequently, they notified us again on 5 March (Sunday) as soon as the case had been confirmed. The following day, a team of professional staff from the CHP visited Guangzhou to meet with the experts of the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention of the Guangdong Province to exchange views and share information on epidemiological and laboratory findings of the case. This can again demonstrate our close working relationship with the Mainland health authorities, and that our notification mechanism has been working smoothly and is not interrupted by public holidays.

Furthermore, the MoH, Hong Kong and Macao signed a Cooperation Agreement on Response Mechanism for Public Health Emergencies (the Agreement) in October last year to formalize and strengthen the above cooperation. Under the Agreement, in the event of a public health emergency with cross-boundary implications occurring in one or more of the three places, the concerned place(s) would immediately notify the other parties. The three places will also activate their respective emergency response mechanism and coordinate joint response actions as appropriate. We believe that it would be more meaningful and productive to build on the above cooperation initiatives and focus on furthering their development so that we can continue to benefit from these partnerships through the sharing of expertise and first-hand outbreak information.

Please rest assured that we would strive to maintain our momentum in working out with the MoH and the HDGP ways for improving our notification and cooperation mechanisms, including the use of electronic means for facilitating communications, taking into account the operating experience and international best practices such as WHO's guidelines and recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susie Ho".

(Miss Susie Ho)
for Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food