

Transcript of remarks by SFH at media session

The Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan; the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Mr Edward Yau; and the Secretary for Home Affairs, Mr Caspar Tsui, met the media on the latest social distancing measures at a media session today (March 29). Following is the transcript of remarks by the Secretary for Food and Health:

Reporter: Firstly, on the easing of some of the restrictions before the Easter holiday, you have mentioned that it is a very critical period. Why couldn't we just wait until after the holiday before easing the restrictions for some of these venues? Secondly, on vaccination exemptions, is there any consideration about exempting people who have been vaccinated two jabs plus 14 days from maybe the mandatory close contact quarantine as well? Do you have any information on when the BioNTech jab might also be available back in Hong Kong? Thirdly, on the travel arrangements, is there any consideration as to the choice of vaccines that people take where they will be able to travel in the future?

Secretary for Food and Health: Thank you for your questions. First of all, as I have said earlier, we are very careful in terms of our social distancing measures. We are basically not relaxing, we are just adjusting some of the situations that we have already open, for example, the theme parks and also some of the places whereby we have assessed very carefully the risk and the risk is not high. Therefore, we think in the coming 14 days there are some situations that can have some adjustments.

Regarding the scheduled premises under Cap 599F, we maintain largely what is already relaxed. Although we notice that after our earlier relaxation, there are clusters in the restaurants as well as the gym, but given all our stringent measures and also the increased capacity that we have built up throughout the last few months in terms of testing, in terms of contact tracing and also in terms of our facilities' capabilities, we are confident that if there are major outbreaks, we would be able to deal with it. Therefore we decide to maintain but not close down these scheduled premises. This is our position.

As far as the exemption is concerned, regarding the every 14 days regular testing, with enough supply of vaccines in Hong Kong, and with the consolidation of all the work that we have done so far, and also with the risk assessment, we have come to the

decision that if people have vaccinated, it can replace the 14-day regular testing of staff of the scheduled premises under Cap 599F. We have also communicated with the Education Bureau and the Development Bureau, for teachers, if they have got vaccinated, then it can also replace their current testing arrangements, and the same with the construction workers.

As far as BioNTech is concerned, during the weekend we have already issued the press release to state the current situation. The Department of Health, and the Food and Health Bureau have been working very closely with Fosun and BioNTech. First of all, they have already confirmed that the situation that we have identified - some of the packaging defects - would not have anything to do with the safety of the vaccine. But some testing is going on. We hope, and they have already told us, that hopefully within the coming week, we will be able to have a final report. So hopefully we can resume the vaccination shortly.

The third question is about travel arrangement, it is about how countries look at the type of vaccines that people have vaccinated. For people coming from abroad, how are we going to confirm that they are vaccinated? I think obviously we would have to look at what vaccines are authorised by their country. I think this is the most important that whatever vaccine people are vaccinated, they are authorised by the health authority of the country concerned.

Reporter: First of all, about the adjustment of the social distancing measures, experts had said that currently the epidemic situation in Hong Kong is not yet stable. Professor Chan, are you worried that such adjustment will lead to a quick rebound of infections. And on the shortening of quarantine period for people from low-risk countries, when will such arrangement come into effect? And also about the arrangement of bringing back stranded Hong Kongers in the UK in late April, approximately how many flights and how many Hong Kongers that are expected to benefit from this arrangement as well? And also on the BioNTech vaccine, Professor Chan, you have mentioned that we are seeing possibly a final report in the coming week, but could you tell Hong Kong people when they could receive the BioNTech vaccine again at the earliest time, because such supply will actually affect the vaccination rate in Hong Kong as well. Thank you.

Secretary for Food and Health: A few questions, first of all, as I said earlier, the announcement of our continuation of the social distancing measures is not a relaxation. So we are doing minor adjustments on some of the activities that we have very carefully

assessed the risk, and this is also something that is related to people's mental health, so we are not only looking at physical health. We are also very careful about the scheduled premises, so we want to maintain the current scheduled premises opening, and not to open any more at this point of time further as the coming 14 days is critical and also crucial in terms of our efforts, sustaining our efforts to control the epidemic situation as well as hopefully to strive for zero cases.

Number two, your question about when can we start the reduction of quarantine on the low-risk countries. I think within this week, we will send out more details of the reduction of quarantine period. Not only the reduction of the quarantine period from 21 days to 14 days, but we have also put in place testing, for example, testing on day 19, and also they must go through "test and hold" at the airport, plus 14 days' quarantine, plus self-monitoring for another seven days. So we will announce the details sometime within this week and hopefully we can start within next week. So it is about in two weeks' time.

Third is about the UK situation. We agreed that some people (Hong Kong residents) are stranded in the UK because we have the boarding restriction earlier. We are going to lift that boarding restriction. We are working closely with the airlines to have a few flights for these people to come back to Hong Kong. It would take some time - hopefully it would happen towards the end of April. We are still working very closely with the airlines. Again, we are also putting in further restrictions, for example "test and hold" at the airport, and also regular testing on day seven, day 12 and day 19, and they must all be quarantined in a designated hotel for 21 days, and so on and so forth. Again, within this week, we will issue a press release to give out all the details.

Finally, your question about BioNTech. As I have said, we are actually communicating with them more than once per day. We are working very closely with them to ensure that they give us their report as soon as possible because this suspension is ordered by the manufacturer. We have already issued a press release on the initial findings that are reassuring. We hope to resume the injection, hopefully, within this week. But at this point of time, I cannot say on which day of the week because we still have not got the report, but we will chase them almost every hour. Thank you.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)

Ends/Monday, March 29, 2021

Issued at HKT 19:12