



2 February 2020

Dear Heads of Post,

## **Fighting the Novel Coronavirus Together**

I am writing to present to you the strategy adopted by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government in combatting the novel coronavirus infection and the various measures we have rolled out as the situation evolves. I should add that many of these measures have been undertaken well before the declaration by the World Health Organization that the outbreak of the novel coronavirus constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 31 January. I hope you will find this information useful and re-assuring.

Thanks to an excellent public and private health care system, Hong Kong enjoys extremely good health indicators. Our robust public health system has been built up over the years, improved and strengthened with experiences gained in coping with major disease outbreak such as avian flu, SARS, swine flu, etc. Institutionally, the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) under the Department of Health plays a pivotal role in disease prevention, surveillance and infection control while the Hospital Authority (HA) and its over 40 medical institutions provide the screening and treatment services. The Prevention and Control of Diseases Ordinance (Chapter 599 of the Laws of Hong Kong) provides the legal basis for the necessary interventions by the health authority. This system is well tested and supported by dedicated health care professionals. We are also privileged to be able to benefit from researches at our universities and expert advice from renowned professionals working in our two medical schools. All these components of our public health regime have been put in place since notification of the outbreak in Wuhan was received on 31 December 2019. Within days, the Food and Health Bureau promulgated the *Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel*

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*Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance 2020* and made a subsidiary legislation under Cap. 599 to place this novel disease under the control regime. These efforts are commended by public health experts.

On 25 January, I elevated the response level under the Preparedness and Response Plan from “Serious” to “Emergency” with immediate effect. Apart from personally chairing the Steering Committee cum Command Centre to oversee concerted efforts in fighting the disease, I have set up an expert advisory panel, comprising four world-renowned experts<sup>1</sup> with rich experiences in public health, epidemiology and clinical aspects to provide professional advice to me and the HKSAR Government in a direct and timely manner. I held a first meeting with the Panel earlier this week and have been consulting them individually throughout the period.

The HKSAR Government has never under-estimated the severity of this infection. I have asked my colleagues to adhere to three important principles in meeting this public health challenge, that is, speedy response in light of the situation, moving ahead of the times to prepare for the worse and operating in an open and transparent manner. More importantly, we are fully aware that we need an all-out effort and have therefore appealed to different sectors of our community, not least the medical and health professionals, and every member of public in Hong Kong to work together to fight against the virus. Responding to the rapidly changing infection situation in the Mainland and based on experts’ advice, we have adopted a strategy of “containment” with specific measures to achieve early identification, early isolation and early treatment of the infected as well as measures to significantly reduce population mobility and in-population social contacts. I hosted three press conferences between 25 and 31 January to announce those measures which are summarised below.

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<sup>1</sup> The four experts are: Professor Gabriel Leung, Dean of Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong; Professor Keiji Fukuda, Director and Clinical Professor of the School of Public Health of the University of Hong Kong and former Assistant Director General of the WHO; Professor Yuen Kwok-yung, Chair of Infectious Diseases, Department of Microbiology, Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong; and Professor David Hui Shu-cheong, Stanley Ho Professor of Respiratory Medicine and Director of Stanley Ho Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases.

### ***Health surveillance and related measures***

All government bureaux and departments and the HA have stepped up public health measures to contain the novel coronavirus outbreak. Key measures include –

- ***Surveillance*** – The CHP of the Department of Health has been updating the surveillance criteria and testing protocols in view of the latest developments. Doctors in both the public and private sectors are required to report to the CHP if they encounter patients that meet the surveillance criteria, currently referring to people who have been to Hubei within the past 14 days and are exhibiting symptoms of fever and others. Patients so reported will receive treatment in isolation in public hospitals and undergo medical tests as necessary. For confirmed cases, the CHP conducts epidemiological investigation, contact tracing and other necessary control measures, to ascertain and contain the extent of transmission of infection. As at 10 pm on 1 February, a total of 14 cases have been confirmed in Hong Kong, involving seven Hong Kong residents and seven Mainland residents from Wuhan. There is so far no evidence or imminent risk of sustained community level outbreaks. Notwithstanding this, we have further stepped up our measures by carefully monitoring all infected cases and closely tracing close contacts and other contact.
- ***Legislative amendments*** – Effective from 8 January, the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap. 599) and the Prevention and Control of Disease Regulation (Cap. 599A) have been amended to provide legal backing for the Director of Health to take necessary actions. Amongst others, suspected cases must be reported to the CHP for investigation and follow-up. It also empowers prohibition of suspected patients and contacts of a specified disease from leaving Hong Kong.
- ***Quarantine*** – To tackle the disease, asymptomatic close contacts are required to undergo quarantine to cut off the transmission of diseases. Three holiday camps have been made available for the purpose and we are making ready additional quarantine centre facilities. We have also

completed a study on the use of electronic tracking bracelets and positioning technology to help in surveillance, in case home isolation needs to be imposed.

- ***Health declaration and exit screening*** – Making reference to the WHO's recommendations, we have enhanced exit screening to facilitate early identification of passengers with symptoms. Starting from 1 February, the Hong Kong International Airport has implemented body temperature checks for both departing and transit passengers, on top of the standing temperature checks for all incoming passengers. No boarding will be allowed for passengers with fever. On land-based control points, the HKSAR Government has imposed a requirement for health declaration at Lo Wu Control Point and the Shenzhen Bay Port since 1 February and will extend it to other control points.

For all cases notified as suspected to be infected, HA will admit them into isolation beds in hospitals with a view to preventing transmission into the community. The HA and hospitals in all clusters will continue to keep a close watch on the situation and allocate resources to mobilise other isolation beds when required. Rapid testing is now available in laboratories of public hospitals. This will considerably shorten the time to have results so that those with negative outcome may be discharged early in order not to overburden the hospital staff. Designated clinics will be activated if there is community outbreak in Hong Kong or the neighbouring region (e.g. Guangdong Province), to support the hospitals in handling a larger number of suspected cases or follow-up action in order to alleviate the pressure on accident and emergency departments.

### ***Reducing the flow of people between the Mainland and Hong Kong***

From 27 January, we have prohibited Hubei residents and those, with the exception of Hong Kong residents, who have visited Hubei Province in the past 14 days from entering Hong Kong. We have suspended flights between Hong Kong and Wuhan, halved the number of flights between Hong Kong and other Mainland cities by stages, suspended all services of the Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link and the Intercity



Through Train, and reduced cross-boundary coaches/shuttle bus and ferry services. Six control points<sup>2</sup> linking Hong Kong and the Mainland have since 30 January been closed for passenger clearance. As a result, the number of Mainland visitors arriving in Hong Kong via control points (except the airport) has dropped significantly (by 91 per cent compared to the figure two weeks ago). At my request, the Mainland authorities have suspended issuing endorsements under the Individual Visit Scheme. We will keep the situation under close monitoring and will continue to liaise with the Mainland to explore further consolidation and tightening the management of the control points as the situation warrants.

### ***Enhancing “social distancing” to prevent spread of the disease***

To reduce social contacts in the community, the HKSAR Government earlier on extended the Chinese New Year holidays of secondary schools, primary schools, kindergartens, child care centres and special schools to 17 February. In light of the latest developments, we have extended class suspension to 1 March and will keep the situation under review. We have introduced “work from home” arrangement to Government employees over the last week and, while I have announced on 31 January the extension of this arrangement to the coming week, I have asked that apart from providing emergency and essential public services, departments should provide basic services to members of the public, albeit on a limited scale. The HKSAR Government has appealed to employers to continue to make flexible work arrangements for employees in accordance with their operational needs. Events that will attract a large number of people will continue to be cancelled by the HKSAR Government.

### ***Hong Kong residents returning from the Mainland***

To reduce the risk of the disease spreading in the community, all Hong Kong residents who have visited Hubei Province in the past 14 days have to submit themselves to health assessment upon their return to Hong Kong. Those who are asymptomatic will be arranged

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<sup>2</sup> Control Points closed include: the West Kowloon Station, Hung Hom Station, China Ferry Terminal, Tuen Mun Ferry Terminal, Man Kam To Control Point and Sha Tau Kok Control Point.

to stay in quarantine centres for surveillance. Hong Kong residents returning from other places on the Mainland have been advised to stay home for 14 days upon their return as far as the circumstances permit. Those who need to go out should wear a surgical mask for 14 days upon their return.

***All-out efforts to support front-line health care staff***

We are grateful to all front-line health care staff and other personnel committed to these disease prevention and control efforts. We will continue to fully support front-line health care staff. Although the supply of surgical masks remains tight, we will accord priority to their needs.

***Increasing supply of surgical masks through a multi-pronged approach***

The HKSAR Government will continue to spare no effort in sourcing globally, increasing local production, liaising with mask suppliers in the Mainland and seeking assistance from relevant authorities to help supplies reach Hong Kong, with a view to meeting the needs of healthcare workers and other personnel providing services to the public, as well as stabilising the market supply. The HKSAR Government also appeals to private and charitable organisations to donate surgical masks to the underprivileged, and stands ready to play a facilitation role with financial resources and co-ordination.

***Be transparent***

At this critical juncture, I could not emphasise more the importance of risk communication with the public. Apart from **daily** briefings (normally at 4:30 p.m.) by the CHP and HA senior representatives on the number of cases (suspected, confirmed or under investigation), relevant contact tracing, quarantine, etc., the the latest situation of the novel coronavirus infection in Hong Kong can be found on a dedicated webpage: [www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/102465.html](http://www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/102465.html). Press conferences are also held by senior officials to announce major government decisions and measures, as well as to update the public on major developments in combating the virus.

I wish to put beyond doubt that the HKSAR Government's efforts are guided by public health consideration making full reference to advice received from our in-house professional colleagues and outside experts. Our strategy is in line with the WHO's latest recommendations. Tackling the novel coronavirus infection is our top priority now, and we will not hesitate to introduce more measures when necessary.

With the above measures, I sincerely hope that you will bring home the message that Hong Kong has in place a robust, multi-faceted and well-tested system to tackle the new infection. We embrace the advice of the WHO and stand ready to work with international, Mainland and local stakeholders in fighting the disease. Suspending air passenger services to Hong Kong or drastic measures such as restrictions against entry of Hong Kong residents are, in our view, unjustified and unwarranted. We will do our utmost to safeguard public health and to ensure that Hong Kong remains an international city and an aviation hub.

Wishing you all good health!

Yours sincerely,



( Mrs Carrie Lam )  
Chief Executive

Hong Kong Special Administrative Region  
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