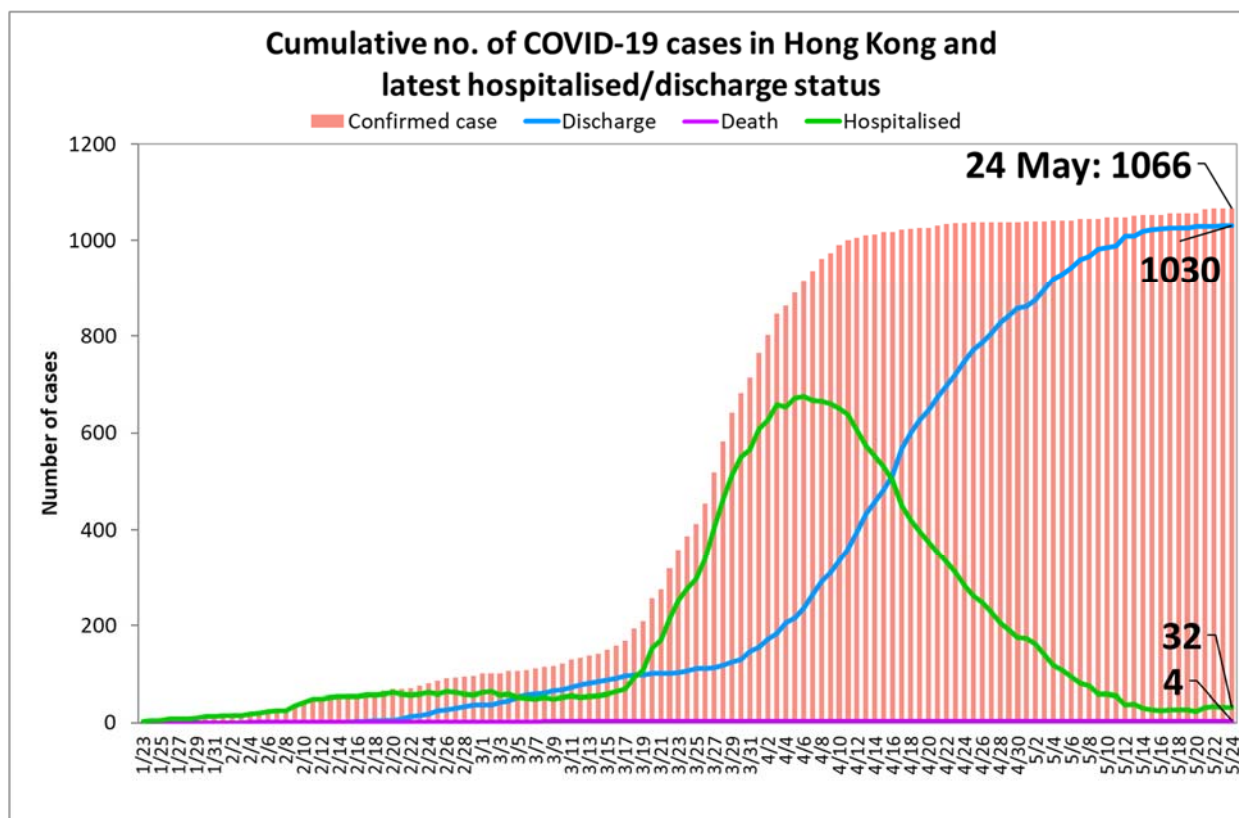


Four Months into Our Fight Striking the Right Balance

In Hong Kong, two terms have emerged in the prevention and control of COVID-19. One is “Suppress and Lift”, the strategy we use to formulate our anti-epidemic plan. The other is “three-way tug-of-war”, a metaphor illustrating the need to carefully consider the three factors of public health, economic impact and social acceptance in devising the appropriate measures. These two terms are very often related to the question of whether we are able to strike the right balance and make flexible adjustments to control measures. While the Government attaches great importance to the professional advice of every member of our Expert Advisory Panel, striking the right balance is not an exact science; my colleagues and I, as well as Non-official Members of the Executive Council, having taken into account various factors and listened to views from various sectors, have to make the most appropriate decision.

Developments of the epidemic

Hong Kong’s epidemic situation has stabilised since mid-April. Excluding imported cases, no local infections were recorded for 23 consecutive days from 20 April to 12 May. This shows that the anti-epidemic efforts of the Government and various sectors of the community have yielded encouraging results. The number of infected patients discharged from hospital has also increased. As at 24 May, there were only 32 confirmed patients in hospital. The pressure on hospitals has been reduced significantly.



However, a cluster of three local infection cases emerged in mid-May, and the infection source remains unknown. Although we have not yet seen signs of further community spread, the emergence of sporadic local cases suggests there are still undetected infections in the community and hence, a risk of transmission. We have to stay alert to prevent a rebound of the epidemic.

Anti-epidemic efforts

Apart from the few sporadic local cases, we continue to see imported cases arising from Hong Kong residents returning from overseas. Yet, the risk is generally manageable, and our quarantine and hospital bed facilities are relatively adequate. An increasing number of experts have pointed out that, given the nature of COVID-19, it is difficult to achieve the target of “no local cases” within a short period of time. Some even believe that before effective vaccines are successfully developed, or before the majority of the population develop antibodies, governments and people around the world will have to get used to the

intermittent emergence of sporadic local cases for some time to come. In addition, with stringent social distancing measures having been in place for over a month, people were anxious to go back to a normal life as quickly as possible; suspension of public services and economic activities also should not last for too long. After balancing various factors, the Government started to relax anti-epidemic measures in a moderate and phased manner from early May, including the gradual return to normal operation for public services, lifting certain restrictions on business operations, and the phased resumption of classes.

We remain very cautious in relaxing social distancing measures. The decision on the types of businesses and social activities allowed to reopen/resume was based on a thorough assessment. Those engaged in these businesses and social activities have to comply with epidemic control requirements formulated by relevant bureaux and departments in consultation with stakeholders. Major measures implemented by the Government in response to developments over the past month are set out below.

Date	Event
27 April	The Food and Health Bureau approved funding of \$111 million from its Health and Medical Research Fund to support the medical schools of The University of Hong Kong and The Chinese University of Hong Kong to conduct 26 medical research studies on COVID-19, including the development of vaccines and novel antiviral drugs.
28 April	The Government announced that virtually all civil servants and public services would return to normal working/operating hours from 4 May.

28 April	The Government announced the extension of compulsory quarantine for persons arriving from the Mainland, Macao and Taiwan for one month to 7 June; the broadening of exemption to cover cross-boundary students and related service providers as well as cross-boundary travellers whose manufacturing operations, business activities or provision of professional services are in the interest of Hong Kong's economic development; and the empowering of the Director of Health to cancel the quarantine orders against persons arriving from the Mainland or Macao under certain conditions.
30 April	The Government arranged a chartered flight to bring back 319 Hong Kong residents stranded in Pakistan. They were required to take a viral test before starting compulsory quarantine for 14 days at the designated quarantine centre.
5 May	The Government announced that the statutory measures on social distancing would be extended for 14 days to 21 May. At the same time, some control measures would be relaxed, including increasing from four to eight the number of persons allowed in group gatherings; increasing from four to eight the number of persons allowed to be seated together at one table in catering premises; allowing the reopening, subject to compliance with certain requirements, of seven types of business premises including amusement game centres, fitness centres, places of amusement, places of public entertainment (such as cinemas), beauty parlours, massage establishments and mahjong-tin kau premises; allowing bars and pubs to resume operations subject to compliance with more stringent requirements; while karaoke establishments, bathhouses, party rooms, clubs and night clubs would remain closed for 14 days.

5 May	The Government announced the phased resumption of classes for schools. For S3 to S5 students, P4 to S2 students and K3 to P3 students, classes would resume on 27 May, 8 June and 15 June respectively. For K1 and K2 students, classes would not resume this academic year. International schools can gradually resume classes. The Government would consider the issue of cross-boundary students separately and make arrangements accordingly.
5 May	The Government announced six measures to increase the supply of masks, including the distribution of one reusable CuMask+™ to each Hong Kong citizen and 10 disposable masks to each household. The Government would continue to provide masks for the care staff of residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs) and residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs), front-line cleaning workers engaged by the Government's outsourced service contractors, the elderly, the disadvantaged etc.
11 May	The Department of Health (DH) arranged for Hong Kong residents who had been stranded in areas of unknown epidemic situation such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and South Africa and who had returned to Hong Kong (including those arriving by Government-arranged charter flights or other flights) to take a viral test before undergoing compulsory quarantine for 14 days at the quarantine centre.
12 May	The Hospital Authority started to conduct viral tests on samples collected from asymptomatic inpatients who are residents at RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes as well as patients admitted to psychiatric wards. At the same time, the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme was extended to include all inpatients at public hospitals with influenza-like illness symptoms.

13 May	The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) announced that from 15 May the Enhanced Laboratory Surveillance Programme would be extended to provide free viral tests for those working at the Hong Kong International Airport. Staff members working at RCHEs and RCHDs under the Social Welfare Department would also be tested if they had mild symptoms.
13 May	Following a local case involving three family members, the CHP distributed about 3 000 deep throat saliva sample bottles to their relatives and friends, nearby residents and hawkers. Test results of over 2 200 samples received were all negative.
15 May	The University Grants Committee provided an additional funding allocation of \$250 million to support group research projects related to COVID-19 and other novel infectious diseases.
18 May	The Government arranged a chartered flight from New Delhi to bring back 249 Hong Kong residents stranded in India. They were required to take a viral test before undergoing compulsory quarantine for 14 days at the quarantine centre.
19 May	The Government announced that the prohibition of group gatherings with more than eight persons in public places would remain in force until 4 June, with a broadening of exemption to cover religious gatherings. In addition, the anti-epidemic requirements for fitness centres and places of public entertainment were adjusted. Bathhouses, party rooms, clubs or night clubs and karaoke establishments would remain closed until 28 May.

19 May	The Leisure and Cultural Services Department announced that leisure facilities including most public swimming pools and barbecue sites would reopen on 21 May, and beaches would be opened progressively from 23 May.
19 May	The Government announced the stepping up of community surveillance by striving to enhance the public laboratory testing capacity to 7 000 viral tests a day as soon as possible. The DH started on 20 May to distribute sample bottles to RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes with the aim of testing 3 000 workers within this month. Apart from the designated Chinese medicine clinics in the 18 districts, the DH would also provide sample bottles for the public at the Kwai Tsing District Health Centre on a pilot basis.

Some in the community opined that the Government’s decision on prohibiting group gatherings was politically driven. Such a claim is totally unfounded. Adjustment to control measures is always based on public health considerations in terms of risk assessment of virus transmission and the advice of public health experts both inside and outside the Government. Even though we need to take into consideration factors like economic impact and social acceptance, we remain always mindful of not undermining our anti-epidemic efforts. The vast majority of Hong Kong people understand the rationale behind this, and some are in favour of a “stringent rather than loose” approach at the expense of organising or taking part in large scale leisure, cultural or festive events.

Future work priorities

Although the epidemic situation has eased, we will not drop our guard. We will introduce appropriate measures in response to changes in global and local epidemic situation. We are currently focusing our efforts on the following:

- (1) Stepping up viral testing. Persons arriving from overseas are required to take a viral test, and only those who test negative can then proceed to compulsory quarantine. This is an effective way to prevent persons infected overseas from causing community infection. Due to the local infection cases with unknown source in mid-May, the CHP is stepping up viral testing as recommended by experts to ascertain the presence of the virus in the community. We are enhancing testing capacity in different ways, including purchasing additional equipment for the Public Health Laboratory Centre (PHLC) and extending the working hours of PHLC before the equipment is put into operation; allocating funding to the medical schools of The University of Hong Kong and The Chinese University of Hong Kong to purchase the necessary equipment; and contacting private laboratories in the hope that they can also enhance their testing capacity. Our current target is to enhance the testing capacity of public institutions to 7 000 viral tests a day as soon as possible so we can identify and cut the potential virus transmission chain in the community.
- (2) Adopting a multi-pronged approach to increase supply of masks. As the epidemic may last for some time, people still need to continue to wear masks on various occasions. Regarding the reusable CuMask+™ distributed to each Hong Kong citizen, so far more than 3.6 million people have registered for it and 2.9 million masks have been delivered by Hongkong Post. Next month, we will distribute disposable masks to the public for free, and will strive to continue to provide masks for those in need, including students, care staff of residential care homes, front-line cleaning workers, the elderly and the disadvantaged.
- (3) Supporting businesses and individuals affected by the epidemic. The Government is implementing the two rounds of measures under the Anti-epidemic Fund and the relief package announced by the Financial Secretary in the Budget as soon as possible to help businesses and individuals tide over the economic winter. Among them, the Government has launched the Employment Support Scheme (ESS) in response to the worsening unemployment

situation (the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate rose to 5.2% between February and April 2020, the highest in more than 10 years). The ESS is now open for applications to provide wage subsidies to help employers retain their employees and first payments will be disbursed in the latter half of June at the earliest.

- (4) Continuing to adjust border control and social distancing measures. We will continue to carefully adjust social distancing measures having regard to the epidemic situation and the effects on the economy, livelihoods and the daily lives of people. If circumstances allow, we will actively consider a gradual relaxation of restrictions on group gatherings, such as adjusting the maximum number of persons allowed or introducing additional categories of exempted group gatherings. For the hundreds of thousands of students affected by class suspension over the past several months, classes will resume in phases from 27 May onwards. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to principals and teachers for the huge efforts they have made in preparing for class resumption.

Fighting the virus together

Fighting the virus is a long battle. We have to maintain the effectiveness of our anti-epidemic efforts while addressing the needs of individuals and businesses. Faced with a weak economy and a rapidly deteriorating employment situation, let's continue to act in the same spirit of solidarity to get Hong Kong back to stability as early as possible.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
25 May 2020