

Guarding Against Virus Variants Striving to Maintain “Dynamic Zero Infection”

The rapid spread of the Omicron variant has caused the global COVID-19 epidemic situation to become severe again, with a number of countries recording the highest daily number of confirmed cases since the beginning of the pandemic two years ago. Some countries that have earlier decided to adopt the strategy of “living with the virus” and completely relaxed their entry restrictions and social distancing rules have had to consider retightening their measures recently. As for Hong Kong, by adopting stringent measures against the importation of cases, we have managed to maintain zero local infection in the past few months, which has not only allowed our citizens to largely resume normal daily life, but also created conditions for the gradual and orderly resumption of normal cross-boundary travel with the Mainland. While Hong Kong has been doing well so far, in the face of the threat from virus variants, our vaccination rate must go up further in order to provide sufficient protection for the community.

The latest epidemic situation

Over the past month, the local epidemic situation has remained stable, and no local cases have been recorded for 80 consecutive days. Yet, with the recent surge in COVID-19 cases worldwide, we have seen an increase in imported cases. For example, 25 imported cases were recorded in a single day on December 25. Under Hong Kong’s stringent measures to guard against the importation of cases, most imported cases were detected through testing upon arrival in Hong Kong or during compulsory quarantine, and have not entered the community. As for the very few cases involving aircrew members who were exempted from quarantine and an airport worker detected during regular compulsory testing, the Center for Health Protection has

taken immediate action, including putting the relevant persons under compulsory quarantine, conducting compulsory testing and tracing close contacts. So far, no community infections have occurred as a result of these cases.

While the local epidemic situation has remained stable, the situation globally is less optimistic. According to statistics from the World Health Organization, the number of confirmed cases in different places has been on the rise since mid-October, and over 800 000 cases were reported in a single day on December 22. The number was close to the peak in April this year and appears to be on an upward trend. Europe accounted for more than 450 000 of these cases, the highest level since the beginning of the pandemic, with the United Kingdom alone recording a staggering daily caseload of over 100 000 cases.

One reason for the rebound of the global epidemic situation is the rapid spread of the Omicron variant. Omicron cases have been detected in more than 100 countries around the world. In Hong Kong, we have recorded more than 50 imported cases involving Omicron so far. According to the observations of experts, Omicron appears to be spreading at a faster rate than other COVID-19 mutant strains, and following this trend, Omicron is set to replace Delta as the dominant COVID-19 variant. Although some believe that Omicron tends to cause a lower rate of severe illness, certain countries are seeing a continuous rise in hospitalisation due to the substantial increase in confirmed cases, which is putting considerable pressure on their healthcare systems. According to reports, some countries that have previously adopted the strategy of “living with the virus” have had no choice but to consider tightening their social distancing measures again, stirring controversy in society.

Anti-epidemic efforts

Hong Kong has been taking very stringent measures to guard against importation of cases with a view to maintaining

zero local infection. In the face of the fierce onslaught of Omicron, we need to be even more vigilant. Hence, as from last month, places having detected Omicron cases are listed as Group A specified places, and specific Group A specified places are subject to enhanced surveillance. In addition to the existing measures, including restricting non-Hong Kong residents from entering Hong Kong and the full vaccination requirement for Hong Kong residents, we have put in place more stringent quarantine and testing arrangements for inbound arrivals having stayed in such Group A places with enhanced surveillance. These arrangements include undergoing compulsory quarantine at Penny's Bay Quarantine Centre for the first few days, during which they have to undergo daily tests and their health conditions are monitored by healthcare professionals. They are then transferred by designated transport to finish the remaining days of compulsory quarantine at their pre-booked designated quarantine hotel. Also, we have recently tightened the passenger flight suspension mechanism and shortened to 48 hours the lead time for specimen collection for pre-departure nucleic acid tests for people boarding Hong Kong-bound flights. While we realise that these measures will cause inconvenience to travellers, we hope they will understand that amid the severe global pandemic situation, it is necessary for us to take stringent measures to reduce the risk of variants entering the community. This ensures that the anti-epidemic achievements made by Hong Kong people will not be wasted. It also creates conditions for resumption of quarantine-free travel and, most importantly, safeguards the health of the community.

At the same time, this month, the requirement to use the LeaveHomeSafe mobile app was extended to all catering business premises and scheduled premises under regulation as planned, and the operation was generally smooth. The Hong Kong Health Code system has also opened for registration, allowing members of the public to familiarise themselves with the system's functions as soon as possible to prepare for re-opening of borders. So far, about 700 000 people have registered for an account.

Considering that some citizens, especially the elderly, are relatively new to digital technology, the Home Affairs Department and the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO) have recently reached out to the community to introduce the Hong Kong Health Code and LeaveHomeSafe mobile apps and provide technical support to the public. OGCIO has held briefing sessions for district/clansman associations and charity groups to enable them to assist their members and service users in using the apps. Moreover, we welcome the Hong Kong Jockey Club, in collaboration with social welfare agencies and local mobile network operators, to distribute smartphones pre-equipped with a data plan to eligible elderly people at grassroots level for free. I hope that every sector of the community and even every citizen will play a contributing role, such as by helping elderly people around us to familiarise themselves with relevant technologies, to bridge the “digital divide” in the city. This will not only enhance the overall effectiveness of the society’s anti-epidemic efforts, but also make it more convenient for the elderly to go about their daily lives.

The major anti-epidemic measures introduced are set out here in chronological order:

Date	Event
November 26	The Government announced tightening of measures to prevent importation of cases in response to the detection of cases involving a new variant (later named Omicron) in southern Africa.
December 3	The COVID-19 Mobile Vaccination Station was launched. The mobile vaccination vehicle would first operate at Sha Tin, Kwun Tong, Kwai Tsing and Tuen Mun to provide BioNTech vaccination services.

December 6	The BioNTech vaccination pilot scheme was launched at a total of 24 vaccination venues of eight private healthcare institutions so as to expand the vaccination network of the BioNTech vaccine.
December 8	In view of the latest global developments of the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the Government required all transit passengers from overseas places and Taiwan to present negative result proof of nucleic acid test when boarding a flight for Hong Kong.
December 9	The requirement to use the LeaveHomeSafe mobile app was extended to all catering business premises and scheduled premises under regulation.
December 10	The Hong Kong Health Code system opened for registration.
December 10	COVID-19 Vaccination Stations were set up in Princess Margaret Hospital and Ruttonjee Hospital. Additional vaccination stations would be set up in Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital in Tai Po and Yan Chai Hospital in Tsuen Wan on December 30. By that time, the number of COVID-19 Vaccination Stations at public hospitals will increase to 13.
December 20	The Government announced that, in view of the rapidly worsening global epidemic situation due to the Omicron variant, strengthened measures were implemented to further guard against the importation of cases.
December 21	The Government announced that the testing requirements for government employees who had not received the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine would be tightened from once a week to

	once every three days starting from December 28, and all government employees would be required to present their COVID-19 vaccination record when they enter government buildings and offices starting from mid-February next year.
December 24	The Government announced that the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme would be expanded starting from January 1, 2022 to provide a third dose vaccination service to all people having received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine with the second dose received six months ago; a second dose vaccination service to persons having recovered from previous COVID-19 infection; and a second dose BioNTech vaccination service to persons aged 12 to 17.

Vaccination

Although Hong Kong's inbound control measures against importation of cases have thus far yielded desirable results, virus variants continue to wreak havoc around the world and it cannot be ruled out that the virus can break through the anti-epidemic barrier, putting our community at risk. We must seize the time made available to us by the inbound control measures to raise Hong Kong's vaccination rate to enhance the overall immunity of the community. The Government's COVID-19 Vaccination Programme has already been rolled out for more than 300 days, and the minimum age of taking the Sinovac and BioNTech vaccines has been lowered to 12. However, the overall vaccination rate is only 72 per cent, with less than half of those aged between 70 and 79 having been vaccinated and the vaccination rate of the group aged 80 or above is only about 20 per cent. Due to the higher infection risk of the elderly, the current vaccination situation is far from desirable. I hope that people would encourage elderly friends and family members,

including those living in residential care homes, to get vaccinated.

Meanwhile, as the virus variants have undermined the protection of vaccines, it is necessary to arrange booster doses for the public. The Government has announced that from January 1 next year, people who have received two doses of the vaccine at least six months ago and aged 18 and above, no matter whether they are the Sinovac or BioNTech vaccines, can receive a third dose of the vaccine. People who have specific needs (for example, outbound travel) and have received the second dose at least three months ago can visit the Community Vaccination Centres, where staff members would arrange for them to take the third dose of the vaccine earlier on a case-by-case and discretionary basis. Immunocompromised persons are required to bring along a medical certificate when they receive the third dose of the vaccine four weeks to three months after receiving the second dose. As for adolescents aged between 12 and 17 who have received one dose of the BioNTech vaccine at least 12 weeks earlier, they can make an appointment to receive the second dose of the BioNTech vaccine from January 1.

Hong Kong is one of the places that provides the most convenient vaccination services, with multiple channels for people to receive vaccination. Apart from the Community Vaccination Centres with extended opening hours, members of the public can also get vaccinated at the COVID-19 Vaccination Stations at public hospitals, designated clinics under the Hospital Authority, private clinics providing the Sinovac vaccine, private healthcare institutions that have enrolled in the BioNTech Vaccination Pilot Scheme and the COVID-19 mobile vaccination stations. What is lacking now is the willingness of a minority of people to receive vaccination. In addition to using various means to encourage more people to get vaccinated, we will consider the timely introduction of "vaccine passports", where all members of the public, save for those who have not been

vaccinated owing to health reasons, will be required to present vaccination proof to enter designated premises or participate in specific activities. Among them, a "vaccine bubble" arrangement at government buildings and offices will be implemented in mid-February next year, under which government employees entering such premises for work-related purposes will be required to present proof of COVID-19 vaccination. Exceptions will be made for people who can provide valid medical certificates to prove that they are unfit to receive vaccination due to their health conditions.

Getting vaccinated can protect ourselves and others. It will also create favourable conditions for the resumption of cross-boundary travel with the Mainland, which is eagerly awaited by members of the public, and enable us to emerge from the epidemic. I once again sincerely appeal to members of the public to get vaccinated in line with the Government's arrangements.

With the New Year around the corner, I wish everyone in Hong Kong good health and happiness in 2022.

Mrs Carrie Lam
Chief Executive
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
28 December 2021

Postscript:

In my anti-epidemic report for July this year, I introduced the contributions made by the application of technology in the fight against COVID-19 in Hong Kong. I am pleased that two of the Government-led anti-epidemic projects, namely Achieving Zero-COVID with the Integrated Hong Kong Digital Health Platform and the StayHomeSafe home quarantine monitoring system, were among the winners at the 20th Asia Pacific Information and Communications Technology Alliance (APICTA) Awards announced in mid-December (<https://apicta.org/apicta-2020-2021/>).