

For discussion
on 20 September 2021

Legislative Council Panel on Public Service

Vaccination of Government and Key Public Service Sector Employees

Purpose

This Paper briefs Members on the COVID-19 vaccination of Government and key public service sector employees.

Background

2. The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the world and has a huge impact on the daily lives of members of the public in Hong Kong. Boosting our vaccination rate is considered the most effective way of reinvigorating and revitalizing our city.

3. Since the launch of the Vaccination Programme on 26 February 2021, the Government has striven to boost the vaccination rate across the territory. As far as employees in the public sector are concerned, those who are responsible for maintaining essential public services, those whose job nature requires them to have frequent contact with members of the public and those who are vulnerable or susceptible to infection, and those with greater risks of exposure to infected persons should get vaccinated as far as possible, regardless of whether the purpose is to protect themselves and others or to set good examples. These staff members include direct employees of the Government as well as employees of the Hospital Authority (HA), residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), residential care homes for persons with disabilities (RCHDs), nursing homes and schools.

Government Employees¹

4. The Government has all along considered that vaccination is a key measure of protecting government employees and members of the public receiving services. It is the obligation of all government employees to proactively receive vaccination unless there are duly certified medical reasons. Its aims are to safeguard the health of the people and fellow colleagues with whom they come into contact in their workplace and to ensure that public service will not be suspended in cases where government employees have contracted COVID-19 disease.

Facilitating government employees to get vaccinated

5. To encourage government employees to get vaccinated as early as possible, government bureaux/departments (B/Ds) have been adopting appropriate arrangements for all government employees to get vaccinated during duty hours without taking leave.

6. In addition, the Government launched the vaccination leave arrangement at the end of May, offering government employees a day of vaccination leave for each vaccination dose received, so that they can have sufficient time to recuperate after getting vaccinated. Government employees who were vaccinated on or before 31 May this year, in recognition and appreciation of their support for the Vaccination Programme, are also allowed to apply for one day of authorised absence which may be taken by 31 March 2022 for each dose already received. The Government, as the largest employer in Hong Kong, has played a leading and facilitating role by announcing the launch of the vaccination leave arrangement, which has met with favourable response from different sectors of the community. We understand that some employees only received the first dose of vaccines in August 2021 and could not receive both doses of vaccines until September 2021. In this connection, the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) announced on 27 August 2021 that the period of vaccination for granting vaccination leave for government employees was extended until 30 September 2021, so as to facilitate government employees to receive both doses of vaccines within September 2021.

¹ Government employees include civil servants, non-civil service contract staff and post-retirement service contract staff.

Vaccination in lieu of regular testing arrangement

7. On 31 May 2021, the CSB adopted the vaccination in lieu of regular testing (VRT) arrangement for specific groups of frontline government employees. For officers who are regularly involved in enforcement, inspection and investigation duties having frequent and close contact with members of the public, or government employees involved in high risk duties, B/Ds would strongly encourage them to get vaccinated. Those who have received the first dose of vaccine and provided their vaccination record could be exempted from regular testing. Frontline government employees who have not received the first dose of a vaccine are required to undergo polymerase chain reaction-based nucleic acid tests (PCR tests) using combined nasal and throat swabs (CNTS) at Community Testing Centres (CTCs) on a bi-weekly basis. The relevant testing fees would be fully funded by the Government on a reimbursement basis.

8. On 19 July 2021, the CSB expanded the VRT arrangement to cover all frontline government employees, such as those who perform indoor frontline duties in the office or outdoor duties not involving enforcement, inspection and investigation and having frequent and close contact with members of the public, as well as those who are responsible for maintaining essential public services and/or whose work involves higher risk of exposure to COVID-19.

9. On 2 August 2021, the CSB further expanded the VRT arrangement to cover all government employees, and announced concurrently that starting from 1 September 2021, save for those who are unfit to receive COVID-19 vaccination because of medical conditions supported by a medical certificate, all government employees who have not received their first dose of vaccine should take PCR tests outside their working hours on a bi-weekly basis at their own expense. For government employees who are unfit to receive COVID-19 vaccination due to medical conditions supported by a valid medical certificate, they are still required to undergo PCR tests bi-weekly from 1 September 2021 onwards. Relevant B/Ds will allow these employees to undergo PCR tests where practicable, provided that departmental operations will not be affected, and will continue to fully fund their tests on a reimbursement basis.

10. The array of measures mentioned above are delivering results. As at early September 2021, the first dose take-up rate among the entire civil service has exceeded 90%.

11. Any member of staff who cannot produce a valid COVID-19 vaccination record and has failed to undergo bi-weekly CNTS PCR tests without reasonable cause is not only refusing to comply with directives from the management, but also being irresponsible and inconsiderate to co-workers as well as the public being served. The staff concerned may be liable to disciplinary action. Any government employee who is found evading / abusing the VRT arrangement, including but not limited to absence from duties for a period longer than that required for undertaking the test, may also be liable to disciplinary action. For suspected fraudulent case (e.g. use of forged medical certificates), B/Ds will report to the relevant law enforcement agency for necessary follow up action.

HA Employees

12. Since 2 August 2021, the VRT arrangement has been extended to all HA full-time and part-time staff so as to strengthen the protective barrier against the COVID-19 virus and its mutant strains. Starting from 1 September 2021, those who have not received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccines are required to undergo CNTS PCR tests at CTCs on a bi-weekly basis. They are required to take these tests outside working hours at their own expense. Similar to serving staff, new recruits are also required to undergo regular testing at their own expense if they have not yet been vaccinated².

13. As at 29 August 2021, the overall vaccination rate among full time HA staff has reached 93.3% (about 79 300 staff members have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccines). The vaccination rate has exceeded 99% for doctors, 91% for both nurses and allied health staff, 94% for care-related supporting staff, and 90% for other HA staff.

14. The HA has rolled out a series of initiatives to encourage staff members to receive vaccination so as to protect themselves, their families and patients. These include:

- (i) depots are set up at different hospitals to enable staff members to receive vaccination;

² The Human Resources Division will contact those who will join the HA soon for such arrangement. If the new recruits have not yet been vaccinated, the HA will encourage and assist them to get vaccinated as soon as possible, for example, by giving them health advice during their pre-employment health check and arranging for them to get vaccinated at HA clinics, etc.

- (ii) staff members are entitled to a day of authorised leave for each vaccination dose (i.e. two days in total) received from 1 June to 31 August 2021 so that they can have sufficient time to recuperate. Relevant arrangement has been extended to 30 September 2021;
- (iii) the HA has set up a vaccination enquiry hotline for their staff to answer their queries about vaccination. Colleagues may make a booking for COVID-19 vaccination via the Chatbot of myHR App, and find the latest updates on vaccination and incentives on the thematic webpage for latest information about COVID-19 through the application. The HA will send the latest COVID-19 Bulletin to the staff through the push notification function of the application; and
- (iv) by making reference to the idea of various sectors in launching vaccination reward programmes to encourage members of the public to receive vaccination, the HA has also organised a lucky draw with the generous donation from several members of the HA Board to encourage colleagues to receive COVID-19 vaccines as early as possible. Apart from staging a variety of promotional activities, including lucky draws, visits and stalls, individual hospitals have also set up dedicated enquiry counters or hotlines manned by hospital staff to answer colleagues' enquiries about vaccination.

Employees of RCHEs, RCHDs and Nursing Homes

15. The Social Welfare Department (SWD) has implemented a number of measures to encourage staff members of RCHEs, RCHDs, nursing homes and day service units attached to the premises of RCHEs or RCHDs who are required to undergo regular compulsory testing³ to receive COVID-19 vaccination. Such measures include (i) exempting staff members of residential care homes (RCHs) who have completed COVID-19 vaccination from compulsory testing since 3 May 2021; (ii) ceasing the disbursement of the monthly ex-gratia allowance of \$200 to staff members of RCHs subject to compulsory testing who underwent

³ Since December 2020, staff members of RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes have been required to undergo PCR tests for COVID-19 in accordance with the requirements and procedures set out in the compulsory testing notices issued by the Secretary for Food and Health under section 10(1) of the Prevention and Control of Disease (Compulsory Testing for Certain Persons) Regulation (Cap. 599J).

compulsory testing on or after 25 June 2021; (iii) providing the one-off special allowance for vaccination of \$800, as announced on 18 June 2021, via RCHs for each eligible staff member who has completed COVID-19 vaccination on or before 31 August 2021; (iv) discontinuing the payment of any testing fees incurred in the self-arranged testing by operators of RCHEs and RCHDs from 1 September 2021 onwards; and (v) requiring staff members of RCHs who have not been vaccinated and do not have medical certificates certifying that they are unfit to receive COVID-19 vaccination owing to health reasons to undergo compulsory testing at their own expense since 1 September 2021. As at 1 September 2021, over 80% of staff members of RCHs have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine. In the meantime, in view of the virus variants with higher transmissibility spreading around the world, the compulsory testing period has been shortened from 14 days to 10 days since 25 June 2021, and further to seven days from 4 August 2021 onwards, so as to better safeguard the health and lives of the staff and residents of RCHs, especially frail elders and persons with disabilities.

16. In order to encourage and help the residents and staff members of RCHEs, RCHDs and nursing homes to get vaccinated as soon as possible, the SWD implemented outreach vaccination arrangement for RCHs in April 2021. Outreach vaccination teams under the HA (responsible for the administration of BioNTech vaccine) and visiting medical officers under the Department of Health (responsible for the administration of CoronaVac vaccine) visited RCHs and administered vaccines for residents and staff members who have agreed to receive vaccination at the RCHs. The SWD has also arranged a fresh round of outreach vaccination on 16 July 2021 so that visiting medical officers could administer CoronaVac vaccine for residents and staff members of RCHs.

17. Furthermore, in order to encourage the staff of subvented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to receive COVID-19 vaccination as early as possible, the SWD sent letters to the NGOs on 18 May 2021 informing them of the arrangements for group booking of vaccination, and encouraging their management personnel to set good examples for their frontline staff by getting vaccinated with the use of the group booking service. In addition, the SWD wrote to all subvented NGOs on 2 June 2021 appealing to them to support the “Early Vaccination for All” campaign by providing their staff convenience and incentives as far as possible, for instance, implementing the vaccination leave arrangement, with a view to encouraging them to get vaccinated.

Teachers and school staff members

18. The Education Bureau (EDB) has all along been encouraging teachers and school staff, students of suitable age and their parents to take COVID-19 vaccines proactively; appealing schools to facilitate their so doing by, for example, adopting flexible working hours or allowing teachers and school staff to be absent from schools for vaccination during non-teaching working hours; and encouraging schools to arrange “vaccination leave” for teachers and school staff. In addition, in response to the Government’s announcement on the approval of lowering the age limit for receiving the vaccine to age 12, we have provided various services (including vaccination at a Community Vaccination Centre by group booking or school outreach services) for schools to facilitate vaccination of students through arrangements made by schools. As at early September this year, about 92% of teachers and school staff have received their first or second dose of vaccine. This shows that teachers and school staff have responded positively to the vaccination.

19. In the 2021/22 school year, schools in Hong Kong will continue the half-day face-to-face class arrangements. The EDB requires that starting from 1 September 2021, all teachers and school staff including those teaching and non-teaching staff directly employed by schools, persons who provide on-campus services, and persons who frequently visit school campuses must have at least received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, or undergo regular COVID-19 tests and receive negative results. When individual schools have achieved a high vaccination rate, the EDB will take into account their actual situation and allow them to arrange the whole school or students of individual class levels to resume normal school life, including whole-day face-to-face classes and extra-curricular activities.

Conclusion

20. Thanks to the concerted effort and support of various stakeholders over the past few months, the COVID-19 vaccination rate among employees of the Government and major public service sectors has increased visibly. We are grateful for the active participation of all organisations and employees concerned, and obliged to energetically encourage those staff members and other people who have yet to receive vaccination to get vaccinated as soon as possible. The Government has also strongly appealed to the employers of other public and private organisations to proactively promote and request all their staff members to receive vaccination, and if not, they have to take regular PCR tests at their own

expense. It is our task to raise the vaccination rate among our working population, thereby achieving the goal of having unvaccinated people get jabbed for the sake of protecting themselves and the community.

Advice Sought

21. Members are invited to note this paper.

Civil Service Bureau
Education Bureau
Social Welfare Department
Hospital Authority

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