

LEADING THE NEWS

HEALTH

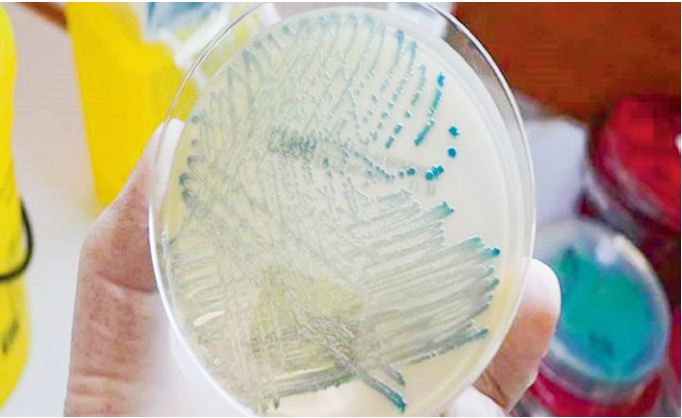
CALL FOR MORE SCREENING TO FIGHT SUPERBUG

HKU researchers urge centralised reporting as public hospitals see worrying rise in cases of CPE, a microbe resistant to powerful antibiotics

Victor Ting
victor.ting@scmp.com

Medical researchers at the University of Hong Kong have called for citywide action to track a drug-resistant superbug that made its presence felt in hospitals before the Covid-19 pandemic. They suggested setting up a centralised reporting platform for all cases of Carbapenemase-producing Enterobacteriaceae, commonly referred to as CPE, to combat the surge. Medical specialists told the *Post* the presence of this superbug was worrying, and Hong Kong needed to step up screening for it, especially among the elderly in care homes. The Hospital Authority revealed in 2019 that CPE cases more than doubled from 473 in 2017 to 972 in 2018. It told the *Post* last week that it did not have updated figures since then, including through the Covid-19 pandemic. The HKU team which examined the 2018 data and cases from the earlier decade said the CPE superbug was especially worrying because it was so hard to treat. “This bacteria can resist many types of drugs, even Carbapenemase, which is generally considered the last line of defence in antibiotics. An infection of CPE will restrict the type of treatment available, while a severe infection can even be incurable,” said Dr Celine Chui, assistant

professor in HKU’s school of nursing and public health. The rise of drug-resistant bacteria has been recorded for some time, especially among patients in hospitals, with older people found to be particularly vulnerable. The rise has been blamed on the excessive prescription and use of antibiotics. “Antibiotics are the main drugs to treat bacterial infections, but antimicrobial resistance will get more severe if antibiotics are abused,” Chui said. “When antibiotics lose their potency, there will be fewer or even no drugs that work for patients, therefore threatening global health in the long term.” Another common superbug, Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), has also showed a rising trend in Hong Kong in recent years. Cases of MRSA detected in the community rose five times between 2007 and 2016, with about 1,000 cases each year from 2014 to 2016. The HKU team found that CPE was present in 1.9 out of every 1,000 people warded at public hospitals in 2018 data, a sharp increase from only 0.01 in 2011. Among the factors behind the rise, the researchers singled out the increased use of the powerful antibiotic Carbapenemase as an “independent dangerous factor”. About 1.37 in every 1,000 patients had a history of using – and possibly misusing – the drug, they found.



Superbug infections have been on the rise in the city. Photo: Handout

Chui said those infected by superbugs could have no symptoms, and their condition could go unnoticed without regular screening. All the time, the superbugs could cause serious harm to their health. “Antimicrobial resistance could also threaten food safety, as the drug-resistant bacteria could enter the food chain through faeces, contaminated soil or water, and go into vegetables and other crops,” she said. Chui and her team recommended the government set up a unified monitoring and reporting platform pulling together the separate systems of the Hospital Authority, public laboratories under the Department of Health, and food authorities. Currently, different hospitals screen patients based on various high-risk factors. While some patients with a history of infection could get accepted for screening, others might be excluded, leading to a missed opportunity in detecting and preventing the spread of the superbug. Chui said authorities needed to strengthen screening criteria by having standardised guidelines, and educate the public on the use and misuse of antibiotics. Commenting on the research team’s findings, Dr Joseph Tsang Kay-yan, head of the Medical Association’s advisory committee on communicable diseases, said he was worried that superbug cases continued rising through the Covid-19 pandemic which had stretched public hospital resources to the limit. The spread of superbugs was more likely in hospitals that were more crowded, he added. “A centralised reporting system by public and private practitioners could help shine a spotlight on the scale of the problem in the city, and where the problem lies exactly,” he said. He said some superbugs were believed to have moved from spreading mainly within hospitals to spreading in the community, naming MRSA as one that was more frequently detected in his patients in the community. To stem the spread of superbugs, respiratory medicine specialist Dr Leung Chi-chiu said more screening should be done for high-risk groups, such as elderly people in care homes.

EDUCATION

60pc of high school students ‘fear meeting peers maskless’

Sammy Heung, Edith Lin and Danny Mok

Six out of 10 secondary school pupils fear meeting their peers without a mask, a survey has found, while principals have urged the city’s authorities to maintain full-day in-person classes for the sake of student development despite a recent surge in Covid-19 cases. Hong Kong Lutheran Social Services released the poll results yesterday revealing a glimpse of how Hong Kong’s social-distancing rules that came into force more than two years ago had influenced young people. The survey, conducted in June and involving 1,051 local secondary school pupils, found that 63 per cent of the students were worried about having to remove their masks to meet people in the future, while 62 per cent said anti-pandemic measures had dampened their desire to socialise. About 48 per cent admitted they were now more afraid to attend face-to-face events compared with pre-pandemic times, while about 40 per cent felt guilty during gatherings as they had to abide by social-distancing measures. “The results showed that teenagers now tend to conceal their expressions and feelings behind masks,” said Chu Ka-yin, a senior manager at the social services body. “They lack opportunities to communicate through expressions, and might be socially withdrawn in the future as they fear interacting with others without a mask.” The organisation said pupils should pay more attention to

social needs and try their best to stay motivated to interact with others and build good relations with their peers. It also urged schools to arrange more group activities with fewer participants so that students could gradually get used to social interaction. The survey was released as school principals urged authorities to maintain full-day in-person classes for students’ development after Secretary for Education Christine Choi Yuk-lin warned that the current arrangements could be suspended if daily Covid-19 cases hit 10,000. The caseload was 9,708 yesterday. Legislator Chu Kwok-keung, a primary school principal and lawmaker in the education functional constituency, said many parents and principals had expressed wishes for full-day in-person classes. “Are half-day classes really beneficial for students? Some secondary school principals have told me that after half-day classes, activities for the rest of the day are not arranged very well. Some of the students may play video games or become addicted to the

internet,” he said. “Parents and schools think that the proportion of severe [Covid-19] cases is not very high, hoping that the government will spend more time to consider their options.” Wong Ching-yung, principal of the Scientia Secondary School in Ho Man Tin, said he also hoped that schools would be able to operate full-day face-to-face classes next month. “The city’s current epidemic situation will just repeat in the future. If we suspend schools every time, it has a huge impact on the education sector,” he said. “Lessons haven’t been running smoothly in recent years and online classes are not very effective for students ... A lot of moral education can’t be done online and we can only teach them academic knowledge.” But Professor Ivan Hung Fan-ngai, a government adviser and chief of the University of Hong Kong’s infectious diseases division, agreed with Choi’s suggestion to suspend full-day face-to-face classes to avoid cross-infection during lunch time and further outbreaks. He said even though all students were required to conduct daily Covid-19 tests, full-day in-person classes should be delayed to prevent those who might be carrying a low viral load not detected through testing from passing on the infection during the lunch break. Half-day school, however, should be maintained regardless of the infection numbers, he added. “This is to balance the children’s psychological status and education. Zoom classes are very ineffective and difficult for the children to concentrate.”

The results showed that teenagers now tend to conceal their expressions and feelings behind masks

CHU KA-YIN, A SENIOR MANAGER AT HONG KONG LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES

Columbarium faces shutdown



People pay tribute to their ancestors yesterday at a temple columbarium in Tai O which is under threat of closure. About 1,600 niches could be removed from the historic temple on Lantau Island as authorities have rejected appeals for a licence. Some 80 villagers, mostly elderly, gathered yesterday to protest against withdrawing the remains of their late relatives stored in Lung Ngam Temple, where more than 90 per cent of the columbarium is used to house the ashes of villagers’ ancestors. “The government doesn’t care about the community and wants us to move thousands of our ancestors’ ashes to Tuen Mun or other places,” said villager Wong Wai-king, a spokeswoman for the Alliance for the Concern Over Columbarium Policy who has several of her family members’ ashes kept there. “More than 300 residents have bought spots here in advance to

be placed near their relatives. The government doesn’t care about our feelings.” The temple was built in 1929, while the columbarium was constructed 51 years later for villagers to store ancestors’ remains. The Private Columbaria Ordinance took effect in 2017 to ensure columbariums operated in compliance with government rules, in a sustainable manner and that only licensed private operators would be able to sell or let out niches. But in September 2020, the Private Columbaria Licensing Board rejected the temple’s application for a licence and also rejected its appeals. A spokesman from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department said the licence application was rejected because the applicants representing the temple failed to submit the required information documents. Photo: Nora Tam

POLITICS

Lawmakers’ early staff bonuses queried

Guidelines not violated, analyst says, but payments could raise suspicions

Nadia Lam
nadia.lam@scmp.com

At least three lawmakers gave bonuses to staff within the first month of the Legislative Council’s new term, with some rewarded weeks after starting work, a *Post* check on politicians’ expense claims has found. Ambrose Lam San-keung, who represents the legal constituency, paid bonuses totalling HK\$34,000 to all three of his staffers on January 31, two weeks after they were hired. Holden Chow Ho-ding, vice-chairman of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, gave a fixed HK\$5,000 Lunar New Year bonus to six of his eight staffers in January, while Kenneth Lau Ip-keung, who represents the Heung Yee Kuk constituency, paid a total of HK\$26,000 in discretionary bonuses to two of his nine employees on January 28. Lam defended his decision, telling Legco’s accounts office in April that his three workers had helped him “voluntarily” between his election last December 18 and the start of the term on January 1. “The bonus was to show appreciation for their voluntary help for all Legco-related matters, including setting up of the member’s office, and preparation of all kinds of paperwork,” he wrote. Lam told the *Post* the three had worked overtime on “numerous days” to help him get accustomed quickly to Legco work. “The bonus is an appreciation

for their voluntary services and overtime work,” he said, adding that in terms of the time spent, the amount was less than the per-hour pay they were entitled to. Chow, a lawmaker since 2016, said his staff had been working for him since the previous Legco term. “They have diligently worked here for many years, so I decided to provide them a bonus of not more than one month’s salary,” he said. Lau told his staff in writing the sum was a reward for their performance, contributions and goals achieved over “the past period”. Former accountability constituency lawmaker Kenneth Leung Kai-cheong questioned Lam’s payment to new employees, saying it was “quite rare” and something he had not heard of before. He said it would have been better if Lam had paid them out of his own pocket if it was meant for the period between his election and the start of the Legco term. Although the bonuses were “not a huge amount”, he said it could still raise questions. Leung said lawmakers usually gave their staff bonuses at the end

of the year, and only to good performers. He understood that some paid bonuses to staff who worked for them in the previous term if they had not done so earlier or had used up their budget. Chinese University political scientist Ivan Choy Chi-keung said although the three lawmakers did not violate Legco guidelines, paying bonuses so early could affect the public’s perception of how they used taxpayers’ money. “It’s a bit hasty,” he said. “It would raise suspicions about whether it was really related to Legco work”. In response, Lam said the work of his assistants involved only Legco-related business and “had nothing to do with the election”. Apart from a monthly salary of HK\$103,130 and an annual medical allowance, each lawmaker is given HK\$2,829,310 a year during their four-year term for office expenses. This can cover office rental, furniture and stationery, consultancy services, promotional items and staff benefits. Another HK\$225,970 is set aside annually for entertainment, liaison and travelling expenses.

The *Post* found that at least seven legislative assistants were paid more than HK\$60,000 – nearly double what district councillors receive. They included an employee of Legco President Andrew Leung Kwan-yuen, who was paid HK\$69,000 a month, and Ivan Chu Siu-lun, founder of the Hong Kong Sustainable Development Research Institute, who was appointed chief of staff for first-term lawmaker Gary Zhang Xinyu. Zhang said he hired Chu to help set up his office and train his staff who were not familiar with Legco matters. “We really needed an experienced person to help us. It’s good that he could make a few months’ time for us,” he said. Checks by the *Post* also showed that lawmakers had spent varying amounts on a wide variety of items and services. Among those who spent thousands on rapid antigen tests for promotional use at the height of the fifth wave of the pandemic were medical sector legislator David Lam Tzi-tuen, who spent HK\$31,500 to buy 2,100 test kits, and Carmen Kan Wai-mun, who spent HK\$13,750 on 550 kits. Reverend Peter Koon Ho-ming, of the Election Committee constituency, spent an “information service fee” of HK\$1,000 for someone to write each of his 21 commentaries in the pro-Beijing *Wen Wei Po*. Lawmaker Simon Hoey Lee, also of the Election Committee constituency, spent HK\$50,000 hiring barrister Wang Kwok-wah to compile a research paper on a bill currently before Legco. Additional reporting by Chester Wong



CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Tibet punishes over 100 officials for zero-Covid failures

William Zheng
william.zheng@scmp.com

More than 100 officials in Tibet have been dismissed or reprimanded this month for failing to contain the spread of Covid-19. The remote Himalayan region had seen only one imported case from central Hubei province since January 2020, the early days of the global pandemic, until an outbreak first reported on August 8 spread to several Tibetan cities. Tibet accounted for nearly 500 new Covid-19 infections out of close to 1,300 reported countrywide on Saturday, with neighbouring Xinjiang and the southern island of Hainan the other major hotspots. Although the caseload may seem insignificant compared with

that in other countries, such numbers are regarded as major outbreaks under the mainland’s strict zero-Covid policy, which aims to swiftly snuff out local flare-ups with snap lockdowns, mass testing, extensive contact tracing and quarantine. According to a report by the state-backed *Tibet Daily*, 22 officials in the regional capital Lhasa faced disciplinary action last week alone for negligence in coronavirus control. Five of them had been fired and the rest handed stern warnings, the newspaper reported. Earlier, the Communist Party committee of the Tibetan city of Shannan on the border with Nepal said six local officials had been pulled up over lapses in epidemic control work, two of whom were dismissed. In Xigaze, where the outbreak

began, 77 officials faced disciplinary action this month for dereliction of duty in the Covid-19 battle, with 10 of them losing their jobs. A dozen other officials, meanwhile, were promoted for “outstanding performance”. On the resort island of Hainan, where snap lockdowns and train and flight suspensions stranded tens of thousands of visitors earlier this month, the party disciplinary commission took action against six officials. They included Gu Hao, party chief of Jiyang district in Sanya, who was dismissed on August 16. Known for its fine beaches, luxury hotels and duty-free shopping, Sanya became a nightmare for 80,000 tourists trapped in their hotels when authorities imposed a sudden lockdown on August 6 to curb a spiralling outbreak. Official statements from both

Tibet and Hainan said the officials were punished for their “lack of political standing”, “inadequate implementation of pandemic prevention and control work” and “serious bureaucracy, formalism, ineffective performance of duties [and] dereliction of duty”. The harsh measures show the zero-Covid policy is still the top item on the political agenda ahead of this year’s party congress, even though it has somewhat eased entry requirements in recent weeks, according to Alfred Wu, associate professor at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. “Dishing out stern punishments is also one way for provincial or regional party chiefs to show their loyalty to President Xi Jinping as it shows they are very serious about the zero-Covid policy,” Wu said.