Tuesday English News Report

*Hong Kong's health experts insist flu **epidemic** is 'under control' despite rising death **toll***

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Health experts claim the flu epidemic is under control and say there is no need for a citywide policy on wearing masks despite the **mounting** death toll.

The winter's **dominant** virus strain - a mutated variant of H3N2 - claimed seven more lives in the city yesterday, bringing the death toll to 118 and the number of severe cases this year to 187.

Yuen Kwok-yung, infectious diseases expert at the University of Hong Kong, said the death toll could reach 400, yet insisted the situation was under control.

"There is no need to panic. The number is not that bad compared with that in 2004," he said.

Yuen said there were four factors to assess the need for more action: the number of young people admitted to an intensive care unit who later died; the death rate for **vulnerable** groups; the percentage of flu cases in intensive care; and the daily rate of H3N2-positive samples.

He urged vulnerable groups, including the elderly, children and **pregnant** women, to wear masks when going out.

Gabriel Leung Cheuk-wai, dean of the medical faculty at HKU, said research had shown H3N2 was a stronger strain of the influenza virus than others. According to an HKU study from 1998 to 2009, some 500 to 1,000 deaths were estimated to be associated with flu per year.

And in the years when H3N2 was the dominant strain - including 2000, 2004, 2005 and 2007 - the **estimated** average could go up to between 800 and 1,000.

The number was estimated by computer models, but Leung said around half of the deaths - between 300 and 500 - were directly related to upper respiratory tract infections. He said the other half could be down to complications caused by influenza.

While a mismatch of World Health Organisation vaccines was said to be behind the higher number of infections, Leung said the vaccine's effectiveness against H3N2 was lower anyway.

"Even if we had the [correct] vaccine, the effectiveness is lower than that of H1 [strains]," he said.

An HKU study conducted between 2009 and 2013 found the rate of protection from the H3N2 vaccine was only 36.6 per cent, compared with 71.5 per cent for the H1N1 vaccine.

But Leung agreed that the **current** situation was under control. "It is serious… [but] within expectations," he said.

A citywide mask-wearing policy was not necessary yet, he said, adding: "It might not be effective … wearing and taking [masks] off inappropriately would be more **contagious**."

The chief of the Centre for Health Protection, Dr Leung Ting-hung, said two major indicators - samples testing positive for flu viruses at the laboratory and the admission rate of the elderly to hospitals - showed no sign of further increases recently.

Three lawmakers - Kwok Ka-ki, Cyd Ho Sau-lan and Andrew Leung Kwan-yuen - raised urgent questions on the epidemic at the start of the Legco meeting yesterday.

Meanwhile, health minister Dr Ko Wing-man was uncertain about a citywide mask policy. "If everyone has to wear a mask, it will create social **isolation**," Ko said. "Just like during Sars, people wouldn't have close contact or even shake hands."

1. What do you think?

2. Vocabulary

Fill in the blanks in the sentences below using words from the box.

epidemic	toll	mounting	dominant
vulnerable	pregnant	estimated	current
contagious	isolation		

1. The _____ number of mainland tourists who will come to Hong Kong in 2018 is 70 million.

2. If you are _____, you are weak and easily hurt.

3. To be _____ means you are going to have a baby.

4. The _____ language in Central and South America is Spanish.

5. The Flu and Ebola viruses are extremely _____. It is easy to catch them.

6. The _____ temperature in London is -2 degrees.

7. An _____ is the rapid spread of an infectious disease to a large number of people in a short period of time.

8. The death _____ (number) has reached 200.

9. This is another way of saying "growing". There is _____ tension in the Middle East due to the rise of terror groups like ISIS.

10. Nobody talked to her and she felt a growing sense of _____.