

Health Crisis: Fears of coronavirus spreading in Hong Kong as local hospital staff back strike to demand closure of border with mainland China

Sunday 2 February 2020, by [CHAN Ho Him](#), [CHEUNG Elizabeth](#), [LEUNG Kanis](#), [TING Victor](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2020).

- **Health chiefs raise worrying possibility that 75-year-old man who became 12th confirmed case on Friday might have been infected in the city**
- **Hospital bosses to meet angry workers on Sunday in bid to head off industrial action**

Thousands of Hong Kong's public hospital doctors, nurses and other medical personnel have voted to go on strike from as early as Monday in a bid to force a total shutdown of the city's borders with mainland China, even as health authorities raised the worrying possibility that the deadly new coronavirus was being transmitted locally.

Members of the Hospital Authority Employees Alliance, a newly formed group that emerged from the anti-government protest movement, voted 3,123-10 on Saturday to take industrial action in phases over five days.

The alliance, which claims to have 18,000 members, is part of a 77,000-strong public health care workforce on the front lines of Hong Kong's battle against the pneumonia-like illness that originated in the mainland city of Wuhan in Hubei province and has now infected more than 12,000 worldwide.

"We voted to go on strike only because there were no other options," alliance chairwoman Winnie Yu Wai-ming said, while further discussions with authorities on Sunday were still pending.

The threat of the impending strike reduced Secretary for Food and Health Professor Sophia Chan Siu-chee to tears earlier in the morning during a radio programme.

"I'm worried about the emotions of health care workers ... as well as our services," Chan said, pausing mid-sentence to compose herself.

Hospital Authority chairman Henry Fan Hung-ling spoke out against the strike, although he had also urged the government earlier to further curb the flow of travellers from the mainland.

"This is not appropriate," Fan said about the strike, on another radio show. "The rights of innocent patients will be affected. It will be unfair to colleagues who are still going about their duties, and further burden them."

There can be many invisible patients carrying the virus in the community, so we can't go to work,

dine at restaurants, go shopping or watch a movie. There is nothing we can do because of this government's ineptitude and refusal to close the borders
Joyce Tang, Whampoa resident

Contingency plans have already been drawn up by public hospital management to reduce non-urgent services, such as by suspending private ward services at Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital in Chai Wan.

In a joint letter, more than 1,000 doctors, nurses and other health care professionals from the Kowloon East cluster of public hospitals also urged the government to close all border checkpoints, but stopped short of threatening a strike.

The group, including Public Doctors' Association president Arisina Ma Chung-yee, also called for legislation to punish patients suspected to have contracted the coronavirus if they withheld information about their occupation or their travel or contact histories.

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Hong Kong rose to 14 on Saturday with an 80-year-old man joining the list.

He had taken a flight from the city to Japan on January 17, then returned on a cruise ship from Yokohama which berthed at the Kai Tak Cruise Terminal on January 25.

The patient, who developed a fever on January 30 and was admitted to Caritas Medical Centre in Sham Shui Po, said he had not been to Hubei province in the 14 days before he fell ill.

In a more worrying development, the Centre for Health Protection suggested that a 75-year-old man who became the city's 12th confirmed coronavirus case on Friday might have been infected locally.

"His case is rather worrying, as we cannot rule out it is a locally infected case," said Dr Chuang Shuk-kwan, head of the centre's communicable disease branch.

The elderly man, who lives in Cheung Hong public housing estate in Tsing Yi, had been in the city for a week having visited Macau, before he began to show symptoms on January 22. None of his family members had any record of travelling to Hubei.

"If we identify more patients similar to this case, that means there is local transmission or a wide transmission in Hong Kong," Chuang said.

Dr Vivien Chuang Wai-man of the Hospital Authority said nine patients were identified as the man's close contacts while he was in a medical ward for a week at Princess Margaret Hospital, before his case was confirmed. Five of them had already been placed under isolation, while the remaining four, who had been discharged already, would be sent to a quarantine camp.

Some 70 health care workers had also had contact with the patient, but they were not considered at risk as they had worn protective gear.

The worrying development came as two more of the 13 confirmed patients worsened into serious condition, bringing the total amount of serious patients to three.

Dr Joseph Tsang Kay-yan, an infectious diseases specialist in the private sector, said that if the elderly man's case was proved to be a local infection, it could mean he had contracted the virus from a hidden carrier within the city.

“Those who infected him could have been ill but did not visit a doctor,” he said. “There is a chance that they have continued to spread the virus in the community.”

Once the case was confirmed, he suggested, health authorities should test all patients with fever and respiratory symptoms as well as signs of pneumonia for the coronavirus. But he conceded that this could be easier said than done.

Whampoa Garden in Hung Hom has been on edge since a man from the crowded residential neighbourhood became a confirmed case on Friday. Many were seen queuing for surgical face masks outside stores a day later.

New coronavirus deaths and cases in China reach record daily highs

Office worker Joyce Tang, 41, said the stay-home advice from the government was beginning to feel like house arrest.

“There can be many invisible patients carrying the virus in the community, so we can’t go to work, dine at restaurants, go shopping or watch a movie,” Tang said. “There is nothing we can do because of this government’s ineptitude and refusal to close the borders.”

Meanwhile, Heritage Lodge, a century-old hotel in Lai Chi Kok, has been designated by the government as the fourth site for quarantining people who have had close contact with a coronavirus patient but have not developed symptoms.

Before the official announcement, more than 100 residents from the nearby private housing estate of Mei Foo Sun Chuen marched in protest, demanding the government find alternatives in less densely populated areas.

Three holiday venues – Lady MacLehose Holiday Village, Lei Yue Mun Park and Holiday Village, and Po Leung Kuk Jockey Club Pak Tam Chung Holiday Camp – have already been designated as quarantine facilities.

Elizabeth Cheung, Chan Ho-him, Kanis Leung Victor Ting

Additional reporting by Natalie Wong

P.S.

• Published: 11:57pm, 1 Feb, 2020:

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3048558/fears-coronavirus-spreading-locally-hong-kong>

• Elizabeth Cheung has been a health reporter for the Post’s Hong Kong desk since 2014. She covers general medical news, breakthrough medical treatments and research, government policy and hospital blunders. Elizabeth has a master’s in development studies.

Chan Ho-him is a reporter for the Hong Kong desk focused on covering education policies. He joined the Post in 2019. Prior to that, he was an investigative reporter at Ming Pao.

Kanis is a reporter for the City desk. She joined the Post in 2018.