

Virus Outbreak: CECC reports first coronavirus death

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Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung is flanked by Centers for Disease Control Director-General Chou Jih-haw, left, and National Taiwan University vice president Chang Shan-chwen as he briefs reporters at a news conference at the Central Epidemic Command Center in Taipei yesterday.

Photo: Chien Jung-fong, Taipei Times

The Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) yesterday announced two new confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in Taiwan, one of whom died on Saturday.

“One of the cases was a 61-year-old man who had chronic hepatitis B and diabetes, but had not visited other countries or had close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19,” said Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳時中), head of the center, told a news conference in Taipei.

The man developed a cough on Jan. 27, sought treatment for difficulty breathing on Feb. 3 and was diagnosed with pneumonia and hospitalized in a negative pressure intensive care unit, Chen said, adding that he died of pneumonia and sepsis.

“With the consent of his family members, specimens were collected for testing before his body was cremated according to regulations on notifiable communicable diseases,” he said.

The CECC said that the man — who became the nation’s 19th confirmed COVID-19 case — was from central Taiwan, adding that it is investigating where he had been and might announce the location of his residence if necessary.

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The second new case is a male relative of the 19th case in his 50s, who tested positive for COVID-19 on Saturday and is asymptomatic, Chen said.

Before Feb. 7, mandatory reporting of suspected cases required that people show symptoms and had visited China, so the man was not reported for COVID-19 testing, he said.

The center on Wednesday began to trace all cases of serious flu complications that tested positive for the flu as reported by hospitals since Jan. 31, Chen said.

As of Saturday, specimens from 113 such cases were tested for the new virus and only the 19th confirmed case returned positive results, Chen said.

The deceased man can be considered a case of “community-acquired infection,” as he did not visit other countries, but was an independent taxi driver who had many passengers that had traveled to China, Hong Kong or Macau, he said.

The CECC has launched an investigation into his communication records and National Health Insurance (NHI) records as well as surveillance camera footage in a bid to find everyone who might have come into contact with the man and track the possible source of infection as soon as possible, Chen said.

Of 79 people found so far who came into contact with the man, 73 have been tested, which resulted in 60 negative results and one positive result — the 20th confirmed case — while the others are awaiting test results, he said.

Centers for Disease Control Deputy Director-General Chuang Jen-hsiang (莊建人) said that a community surveillance program was launched yesterday, allowing three types of people to be tested for COVID-19.

They include people who have visited other countries in the past 14 days or have been

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exposed to people from other countries who experience a fever or respiratory symptoms, as well as those doctors suspect might be infected with COVID-19.

They also include cluster cases that experience a fever or respiratory symptoms, pneumonia cases involving “an unknown pathogen and unrelieved symptoms after three days of antibiotic treatment,” “clustered cases” or “medical professionals.”

The NHI Administration announced that people who have visited or transited in China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore and Thailand in the past 30 days would be marked in the NHI system, allowing doctors to know their travel history when they seek medical attention.

In related news, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday lodged a protest with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) for referring to Taiwan as a province of China in a press release on Thursday.

Reporting the economic effects of the outbreak, the release said gross operating revenues of airlines worldwide are expected to drop by US\$4 to US\$5 billion.

The estimates do not include potential effects due to a range of airline services, such as “Chinese domestic air traffic, or to international traffic with respect to the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative Regions of China, or its Taiwan Province,” it said.

The ministry said the ICAO does not hold itself up to professional neutrality standards and should correct the mistake.

Additional reporting by Lu Yi-hsuan

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