



Emergency medication support service:

Filling the overlooked gap for those under home quarantine during the Coronavirus pandemic

A view from the Hong Kong Red Cross (Branch of the Red Cross Society of China)

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The situation in Hong Kong

To battle a new wave of infections of the coronavirus (COVID-19), Hong Kong has expanded its quarantine policy to all arrivals to the city. With thousands of residents under mandatory home quarantine order, the Hong Kong government offers grocery delivery to those who are not able to go out. However, their medical needs are easily overlooked.

To fill the gap, the Hong Kong Red Cross (HKRC) collaborated with the Auxiliary Medical Service (AMS) to collect prescription medicines for people under home quarantine. The AMS refers urgent requests from quarantined people who are running out of necessary medicines to the HKRC's First Aid Service Coordination Team for handling. While working hand in hand with AMS, this service helps maintain the health of people under mandatory 14-day home quarantine and therefore reduces the pressure on the public healthcare system.

Accomplishing rescue mission in limited time

HKRC's First Aid responders are well positioned to help with this identified need. As well as holding first aid knowledge and skills, they are also trained to be alert to the risks and hazards that they face with regard to this particular pandemic. The HKRC provides them with advanced infection control training, defensive driving skill, basic pharmacology and operation protocol & guideline briefing for this mission to fulfill the 'Prevent and prepare' aspect of the Chain of Survival Behavior.

Team members are alerted by SMS and WhatsApp for operation. Designated staff are on regular roster and deployed to AMS headquarters for this operation. HKRC daily deploys one staff controller who stations at AMS headquarter, and six staff for three cars (each car with one crew and one driver) for the collection and delivery of prescription medicine.

"Providing urgent door-to-door medication delivery service requires a flexible team with detailed and careful logistic planning, first aid knowledge, and most importantly, a sense of mission," said Mr. Darwin LEUNG, Assistant Manager (First Aid Service) of HKRC. Darwin participates in the medical-support service team cooperated with AMS in COVID-19 as a staff controller and crew member.

View from the field

“Delay of medication intake could lead to critical conditions of patients. Our team is designed to help patients taking prescription medicine.” Darwin recalls an emergency case: “We received a diabetic patient’s request to collect his next insulin injections from the Tuen Mun Hospital as he had already consumed his last dose.” Due to the COVID-19, public hospitals were under great pressure and some medical services are therefore delayed. “We contacted the clinic for the collection, but the staff were too occupied to handle our request within service date.” Darwin explained the urgency of the case to the clinic staff and successfully collected the prescription injections for the diabetic patient.

“Skipping insulin injections causes blood sugar levels to rise. With persistent high blood sugar, serious complications such as blindness and kidney failure might occur. Without their medication, chronic patients might need to call an ambulance if complications or infections occur. Not only did the medication delivery protect the patient, but it also relieved the pressure of public health system and its emergency medical service.” Darwin said.

The First Aid Service Coordination Team also faces a serious time challenge as all requests are urgent. *“There might be more than ten requests within a day. We need a robust logistical plan to complete all deliveries of travelling all over Hong Kong. We once received a request from a patient living in an outlying island which took 8-hour travelling to reach them”* Darwin shared. With first-hand experience working for the HKRC and First Aid Service Coordination Team, Darwin’s expertise in first aid responders’ management and knowledge in handling medical emergency facilitates the operations of this special service. Darwin views the medication delivery as a rescue-mission, *“After receiving the insulin injections, the patient’s family was grateful and they appreciated our service. This has brought me a sense of mission to serve the community with my medical knowledge and skills.”*

Our results so far

By collecting essential medicines for persons under home quarantine, the HKRC’s First Aid Service Coordination Team provides community care and support services in a difficult situation. Since 4 March 2020, the HKRC has mobilized 10 staff members, who are trained with advanced infection control, defensive driving and operation-related training, for this service. As of 2 June 2020, HKRC had handled more than 300 home quarantine cases to support people with urgent needs. With knowledge of logistics support, infection control concepts, high flexibility and rapid response, the team helps to shoulder local medical service burden. Putting the spirit of humanity into practice, the service helps patients to avoid medical emergencies, maintains patients’ health and reduces pressure on the public health system.

Other support services we offer

Besides the medicine collection service, the HKRC has offered various kinds of support to the local community in response to the outbreak since early January 2020. Infection control items were provided to vulnerable groups (including elderly persons living alone, elderly aged 60 or above with chronic illnesses, mentally disabled, low-income families and the homeless). We also offer psychological support to people in need, provide emergency assistance to the people under quarantine (for example, providing clothing, blankets and personal sanitary items to the quarantine centers through the Social Welfare Department of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region Government), and disseminate health and hygiene knowledge to the general public through different channels. More details of the services can be found here: <https://www.redcross.org.hk/en/ncov2019.html>

As part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the Hong Kong Red Cross plays an auxiliary role to the government in humanitarian services and upholds its fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, unity, independence, volunteer service and universality to serve the vulnerable.

Questions for readers

- How do you help learners connect to volunteer opportunities?
- How does your training organization support public health during crisis?
- What first aid skills would you emphasize for training specialized volunteers?