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## \$700m virus testing laboratory planned

By WENDY LIM WAN-YEE

A \$700 MILLION public health laboratory centre is expected to be built to detect viruses, the Department of Health said yesterday.

Testing would be speeded up at the centre, which is planned for completion by 2001, said provisional urban councillor Steve Chan Kwok-leung, quoting an official, after talks with two departments to discuss the discovery of the H5N1 avian influenza virus.

The virus, responsible for the death of a three-year-old boy, took three months to identify.

Funding for the new centre would require approval from the provisional legislature.

Mr Chan, of the Democratic Party, proposed to the Health and the Agriculture and Fisheries departments that tests be made on mainland-imported chickens before they went on sale.

"Only 25 per cent of the chickens we eat are local; the rest are imported from China," Mr Chan said.

"We hope they will bring in a stricter testing system like the

one we have for imported cows. They do separate and observe the cows for a period of time," he said.

Mr Chan said the Government only conducted a "simple eye test" to see whether imported chickens were dead or cramped in the cage.

His suggestion was rejected by the Agriculture and Fisheries Department on staffing grounds - the department has 12 officials working at its laboratory.

The Department of Health's community medicine consultant, Dr Mak Kwok-hang, dismissed a suggestion by the World Health Organisation that the samples of H5N1 from the boy were tainted.

"At this stage, the United States' Centres for Disease Control is conducting experiments.

"So far there is no evidence that these two samples, the H5N1 strain find in poultry and the other find in humans, are the same," he said.