

**LEGCO PANEL ON WELFARE SERVICES
LEGCO PANEL ON HEALTH SERVICES
LEGCO PANEL ON MANPOWER**

Government Support to Patients of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

Purpose

This paper informs Members of the support that the Government provides to the patients of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

Background

2. Some LegCo members met a deputation of the Society for Community Organization (SOCO) and SARS patients in January 2006. A few comments on the operation of the Trust Fund for SARS and other related issues were raised. The LegCo's Complaints Division suggested that the relevant Panels, i.e. the Panel on Welfare Services, the Panel on Health Services and the Panel on Manpower, hold a joint meeting to discuss the health, psychological, financial and employment problems that may be faced by SARS patients. LegCo members also suggested designating a department to be responsible for all matters relating to SARS patients.

3. This note provides a summary of the existing assistance to SARS patients.

Assistance to SARS Patients

4. At present, a wide range of assistance is given to SARS patients. Details are set out as follows :

(a) Medical Assistance

The HA has been actively following up the medical problems of SARS patients. The SARS patients are taken care of on a regular basis by the

relevant specialists from the areas of internal medicine, orthopaedic & traumatology, pain, paediatric, psychiatric, clinical psychology, physiotherapy and occupational therapy. Besides doctors' consultations and treatment, the patients are also given assessments as necessary, such as pathological and radiological investigations (including blood test & Magnetic Resonance Imaging/Computer Tomogram/X-ray examination). To provide a more holistic care, since early 2004, besides the specialist clinics, the SARS patients may also be followed up by HA's Family Medicine specialists in hospitals/clinics which are close to their home or work place.

As at 1 January 2006, the numbers of patients being followed up by HA's respective specialists, with some overlapping, are as follows :

Specialist Areas	Number of SARS patients being followed up
Family and Internal Medicine	677
Pain	24
Orthopaedic & Traumatology	229
Psychiatric	57
Clinical Psychology	64
Occupational Therapy	76
Physiotherapy	366

Moreover, the HA launched a fee waiver scheme for SARS patients in February 2005 to provide life-long free medical services to SARS patients for potential SARS related problems. As at end November 2005, a total of about 6 800 such free medical consultations, including allied health treatment, have been provided to the SARS patients.

(b) Assistance for Psychological Needs

SARS patients are also followed up by SWD and HA as necessary to address their various possible welfare needs, including adjustment to illness, emotional problems, financial difficulties etc. Counseling service, supportive group, and financial assistance (such as applications for SARS Trust Fund, Project Blossom Fund etc.) have been provided to these patients as required. During their follow up sessions by their medical social workers, patients may also be referred to clinical psychologists of SWD and/or HA for enhanced psychological support and/or treatment on a need basis. The personal development center under HA (the Oasis) also helps HA staff in this aspect.

Besides, SWD has allocated funding to the Hong Kong SARS Mutual Help Association, a self-help organization for SARS patients, to support the development of self-help and mutual help among themselves and their families so as to promote their rehabilitation and integration into the community.

(c) Financial Assistance

The Government set up the Trust Fund for SARS in November 2003 to provide ex-gratia special financial assistance to eligible SARS patients suffering from dysfunction. Given that this is a tide-over arrangement, the financial assistance for each patient will be determined on a need basis and be of a limited duration. Assistance includes monthly financial assistance to cover their income loss or increase in expenditure arising from SARS, if any, as well as medical-related expenses outside HA's medical waiver scheme, such as private consultations. Their continued assistance is subject to medical re-assessment every six months for monitoring their health conditions and, where appropriate, their financial need as well.

A total of 632 applications have been approved under the Trust Fund since establishment. As many of the patients have gradually recovered, only 290 are now still receiving assistance.

(d) Employment Assistance

The HA has, through its medical and rehabilitation care, monitored the recovery of the SARS patients with a view to helping them to gradually resume their jobs as far as possible.

Besides, as a more targeted effort, the HA launched an integrated rehabilitation program in September 2005 for HA's staff, to expedite their recovery and help them to resume working as far as possible. The HA would arrange jobs for their employees according to their health conditions. For example, a healthcare worker may first take up some simple non-clinical duties for a while, with his/her duties and responsibilities gradually increased to a normal level in accordance with a rehabilitation plan agreed between the healthcare worker and his/her doctor.

For non-HA staff, a “Patient Retraining & Vocational Resettlement Service” is offered by HA in two hospitals, in collaboration with the Employee Re-training Board, to provide work retraining and job placement service for patients with chronic illness and disabilities, including SARS patients, regardless of whether the patients are HA employees or not. This helps the patients/people concerned to learn basic work skills and adjust to work life. Tailor-made rehabilitation programmes may be prepared according to the employees’ job requirements. An employers’ network is also set up to help patients to seek jobs outside the HA. There are successful cases whereby SARS patients eventually secure a job from outside under this programme.

By end January 2006, the HA has helped 149 recovered SARS cases under the two programs. Most of them have been discharged from the programme, with the majority of the HA staff having returned to work already and 15 non-HA SARS patients having resumed their original work or got alternative jobs. Some other 18 HA staff and 10 non-HA employees are still receiving training under these programmes. For the unsuccessful cases, the patients have defaulted appointments/training.

Besides, SARS patients can obtain a comprehensive range of free employment training and assistance services provided by the Labour Department (LD), SWD and Skills Centres of Vocational Training Council (VTC) as follows :

(i) Job Centres

The LD currently operates 10 job centres throughout the territory to help job-seekers, including those recovered from SARS, find suitable jobs. Vacancy search terminals, telephones, fax machines and computers with internet connection and résumé-building software are available in the job centres. Job-seekers may use the facilities provided there to complete the whole job hunting process and obtain referral service.

(ii) Job Matching Programme

Persons who recovered from SARS may need more intensive and personalized employment service may join the Job Matching Programme at LD’s job centres. Placement officers will help them evaluate their academic qualifications, job skills, work experience and job preferences, with a view to facilitating them to look for suitable jobs actively. Placement officers will also

introduce to them suitable training offered by the Employees Retraining Board where appropriate.

(iii) Work Trial Scheme

LD is now operating the Work Trial Scheme to enhance the employability of job-seekers who have special difficulties in finding jobs, including those who recovered SARS. During the one-month work-trial, participants will be arranged to work in jobs offered by participating organizations. On satisfactory completion of the one-month work trial, the participant will be paid an allowance of \$5,000, of which \$500 is contributed by the participating organization.

(iv) On the Job Training Programme provided by SWD and NGO

The programme aims to enhance the employment of people with disabilities (PWD), including SARS patients, through proactive training to address labour market's requirement on employees' work skills and to encourage employers to offer job opportunities for PWD. Each participant will receive job attachment in a NGO or private company, job trial and post-placement service.

(v) Sunnyway – On the Job Training Programme for Young People with Disabilities

The Sunnyway programme targets at those PWD aged between 15 to 24, including SARS patients. In addition to the service components of On the Job Training Programme for People with Disabilities such as job attachment, job trial and post-placement service as above-mentioned, each Sunnyway participant will receive 180-hour employment training to enhance their employability.

(vi) Vocational Training and Rehabilitation Services by Skills Centre of VTC

SARS patients with manifestation of disabilities may attend vocational training and rehabilitation services provided by the Skills Centre of VTC and SWD. The services, include full-time vocational training programmes in technical, commercial and service-related streams, sheltered workshop, supported

employment and on-the job training, aim to enabling people with disabilities to acquire job skills that meet the changing market requirements, and secure suitable employment in the open market that commensurate with their abilities.

Way Ahead

5. We appreciate the difficulties faced by some of the SARS patients. We will continue to support them according to their individual needs and health conditions to the best of our ability based on resources and services available under the present system.

Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
Economic Development and Labour Bureau
March 2006