

**For Discussion  
On 16 April 2007**

## **Legislative Council Panel on Health Services**

### **Mortuaries in Public Hospitals**

#### **Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the system in place regarding the operation of mortuaries in public hospitals and sets out a preliminary account of the case announced by the Hospital Authority (HA) on 11 April 2007 in which the body of a deceased patient at the Prince of Wales Hospital (PWH) was taken away and cremated by the family of another deceased patient.

#### **Background**

2. There are at present 31 public hospitals with mortuaries providing a total capacity of 1,532 compartments. The HA does not impose any charges on the storage of deceased bodies in its mortuaries<sup>1</sup> and does not set a maximum storage period.

3. The average length of storage of the deceased bodies has been increasing in the past few years and was about 15 to 20 days in 2006. Seasonal trend of occupancy has also been observed and the peak periods in both years 2006 and 2007 were in the months of February and March.

#### **Operation of Mortuaries in Public Hospitals**

##### Procedural guidelines on the identification and collection of bodies

4. The HA has clear procedural guidelines on the identification and collection of bodies which, amongst others, stipulate that mortuary staff have to correctly record and double verify the personal information on the bracelet and

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<sup>1</sup> Except the Bradbury Hospice which provides free storage for the first three working days and subsequently charges \$550 per day and the Hong Kong Buddhist Hospital which charges \$50 per day upon the issuance of a death certificate.

the identification tag of the body as well as that on the body claiming form before releasing the body to the family of the deceased.

### Mortuary Computerization Projects

5. As part of its efforts to enhance service operation, the HA has initiated a Mortuary IT Barcode System. Phase I of the project will put in place the relevant barcoding system for identification of deceased bodies. This is scheduled for implementation in the 31 mortuaries by the end of 2007. The HA is currently exploring the possibility of speeding up the implementation of this phase of the project. Phase II of the project, which involves implementation of a Mortuary Register Control System, will be rolled out at a later date.

6. The above computerization projects when put into full operation will complement the existing Mortuary Services Utilisation Monitoring System, which has been implemented since December 2005 in all 31 HA mortuaries to monitor mortuary capacity and to provide computerized monitoring of mortuary operation to minimize chances of human errors.

### Training

7. Training programmes are provided to mortuary staff. A large scale training programme was conducted in June 2006 focusing on the following areas –

- (a) refreshment of the daily work guidelines for mortuary staff;
- (b) implementation of infection control guidelines; and
- (c) enhancement of the quality of service, work and management of hospital mortuaries.

8. The Report of the Independent Committee on the Incident of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary was circulated to the hospitals concerned for experience sharing.

## Audit on Mortuary Operation

9. The HA places much importance on auditing its operation with a view to minimizing deficiencies and losses. In 2006, the HA's internal audit conducted an audit on "Operation of Mortuaries" in ten hospitals. The findings revealed, amongst others, that the hospitals concerned, including the PWH, have in place effective procedural guidelines regarding the identification and collection of bodies.

10. Apart from internal auditing, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), as part of its normal corruption preventive work, has completed a study of the Operations of Public Hospital Mortuaries in 2006. No major risks were identified by the ICAC study, though minor improvement measures had been recommended. The HA has implemented the measures as far as possible.

### **The PWH Case**

11. While the PWH is investigating into the incident, a brief account of the preliminary investigation of the case is set out below –

- (a) The mortuary of the PWH has wrongly released the body of an 88-year-old deceased patient to another family of a 77-year-old deceased patient on 29 March 2007. The incident was discovered when the family members of the 88-year-old deceased patient collected the body on 11 April 2007.
- (b) The hospital management immediately investigated the incident on 11 April 2007 upon notification by the mortuary staff. Preliminary investigation revealed that a Mortuary Attendant has wrongly released the body of an 88-year-old man on 29 March 2007 with the confirmation of the family member. The wrongly released body was subsequently sent to cremation. When the concerned family came to collect the body on 11 April 2007, the Mortuary Attendant discovered that the body has already been wrongly released.

- (c) The PWH has contacted both families concerned to inform them of and explain to them the incident. The hospital has expressed the deepest apologies to both families respectively.
- (d) According to the preliminary findings, the PWH believed that the incident was due to the failure of the Mortuary Attendant to comply fully with the stipulated procedures in verifying the information on the identification tag of the body before releasing it on 29 March 2007. The hospital has temporarily suspended the duty of this staff and would take follow up action in accordance with the HA's human resources policy.

12. The HA is committed to improving mortuary operations to minimise chances of errors and has an effective monitoring system. The PWH case, prima facie, is an unfortunate incident involving human errors.

### **The Way Forward**

13. The Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB) is very concerned about the case and has requested the HA to conduct a thorough investigation and ascertain whether there are deficiencies in the relevant systems and procedures and whether human errors were involved, and if so, the improvements measures that would be taken to prevent recurrence of similar incidents in future. The HA has undertaken to submit a detailed report to HWFB in a month's time.

14. The HA has in place a planned programme to increase the capacity of its mortuaries. The HA expects that by the end of 2007, 156 additional spaces will be provided, which represents 10% increase in the mortuary capacity. The mortuary capacity enhancement programme will continue to be implemented in phases in future years.

### **Advice Sought**

15. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

**Hospital Authority**  
**Health, Welfare and Food Bureau**  
**April 2007**