

Our ref: FH CR 3/3921/07
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2 March 2009

Ms Mary So
Clerk to Panel
Panel on Health Services
Legislative Council
8 Jackson Road
Central

Dear Ms So,

Operation of Mortuaries in Public Hospitals

I refer to item 3 of LC Paper No. CB(2)774/08-09(02). At the Panel meeting held on 12 January 2009, the Administration was requested to provide -

- (a) information on the guidelines adopted by the mortuaries in public hospitals and the public mortuaries in relation to handling the bodies of the deceased, in particular as to whether double occupancy in the same compartment was allowed; and
- (b) a written response to the suggestion of strengthening the training to staff of the Hospital Authority to instill in them a greater sense of respect to the deceased.

Response to item (a)

For mortuaries in public hospitals under the Hospital Authority (HA), a set of Standard Operation Procedures (the Procedures) for body collection and identification has been put in place for mortuary staff to follow. The 2D bar-coding technology and a new Mortuary Information System have also been introduced in all 31 HA hospital mortuaries to further enhance correct identification of bodies and monitoring of mortuary services. Meanwhile, under the ongoing expansion plan of mortuary capacity since 2007, the number of mortuary compartments has increased from 1,532 in April 2007 to about 2,335 at present.

In general, the shared use of one compartment by more than one bodies is not allowed. However, under special circumstances, such as when the number of death surged during long cold spells, the utilization of some of the mortuaries may exceed 100%. Contingency measures, including transfer of bodies to another HA mortuary with spare capacity and temporary storage of two bodies of the same sex in one compartment, will then be taken. Selection criteria of bodies for compartment sharing and special work flow involved are laid down in the Procedures for mortuary staff to follow. In addition, the new Mortuary Information System will automatically alert and remind mortuary staff when there are compartments temporarily shared by more than one bodies.

As for the public mortuaries operated under the Department of Health (DH), key operational features, such as the procedures on receipt and storage of bodies, body identification, bar-coding system etc., are set out in the public mortuaries' internal guidelines, which are reviewed and updated from time to time to provide clear guidance to mortuary staff. A number of improvement measures have also been put in place since 2006 to enhance the professionalism and efficiency in the management and daily operation of public mortuaries.

According to DH's guidelines, bodies should be assigned to designated individual compartments in a cold room. To ensure that there is adequate storage capacity in public mortuaries for handling any sudden surge in the number of dead bodies, the following measures have been adopted -

- (i) additional mobile racks and modular cold rooms will be made available to cater for short-term and small scale over-storage in any of the operating mortuaries;
- (ii) should the number of bodies kept in any public mortuary approach the maximum capacity level, bodies will be transferred to another mortuary with spare capacity; and
- (iii) the Kowloon Mortuary, which is designated for contingency use, will receive bodies when the other mortuaries have reached full capacity.

Response to item (b)

All HA mortuary staff have been provided with training on the updated Procedures and the use of new Mortuary Information System in 2007 and 2008, to ensure staff vigilance and compliance with the Procedures. One other focus of the training was on the importance of clear documentation and correct use of label to

indicate sharing of compartment. HA will also stress the importance of paying greater respect to the deceased in future training for mortuary staff.

Following the Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital mortuary incident in January 2009, HA will conduct a comprehensive review on mortuary management and explore measures to strengthen mortuary operation. Staff training and work culture, as well as the accountability and responsibility issues, will be among the various areas covered by the review.

Yours sincerely,

(Kirk YIP)
for Secretary for Food and Health

cc Hospital Authority
Department of Health