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Panel on Health Services

Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat for the meeting on 12 January 2009

Operation of mortuaries in public hospitals

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Health Services (the Panel) on the operation of mortuaries in public hospitals in connection with the revelation of the mortuary incident at the Prince of Wales Hospital (PWH) on 11 April 2007 whereby the body of an 88 year-old deceased patient was wrongly released to another family of a 77 year-old deceased patient.

Background

2. Immediately after the PWH mortuary incident, the Hospital Authority (HA) set up an Investigation Panel to investigate into the incident, examine the current procedures on the identification and release of bodies, and identify areas for improvement. The Investigation Panel completed a report on its findings and submitted the investigation report to the then Health, Welfare and Food Bureau on 17 May 2007.

3. The Investigation Panel concluded that the principal cause of the unfortunate mix-up of the bodies of the two deceased patients was human errors. HA, in accordance with its human resources policy, had issued a written warning to the mortuary attendant concerned who was required to be retrained on the mortuary operation and procedures.

4. The Investigation Panel also noted a number of contributing factors for the incident, such as overcrowding of the mortuary leading to double occupancy of a compartment and guidelines not being stringently enforced nor consistently complied with on all occasions. The HA Board endorsed a series of measures to improve services in public hospital mortuaries at its meeting on 31 May 2007 as follows -

- (a) enhancing the capacity of mortuaries in public hospitals by providing 220 additional compartments in 2007-2008 and planning a further 330 compartments for 2008-2009. Upon completion, the total number of compartments will increase from 1 532 to about 2 080, representing an increase of about 36% in capacity. Such an increase should be able to meet demand for the next 10 years. According to information and projection from the Census and Statistics Department, the number of deaths in 2005 and the projected number of deaths in 2015 are 31 118 and 37 600 respectively (i.e. an increase of 21%);
- (b) expediting the development of Mortuary Information System to enhance the operation efficiency and control processes of public hospital mortuaries. The project will be developed in two phases. In the first phase, a bar-coding system to facilitate the correct identification of the bodies of deceased patients is scheduled for implementation in the second quarter of 2007. In the second phase, a Mortuary Register System to facilitate the tracking of deceased bodies in all public hospital mortuaries will be put in place by about mid-2008. The aforesaid computerisation 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 computerised monitoring of mortuary operation to minimise chances of human errors;
- (c) further enhancing the procedures for body collection and identification with enhanced counterchecking and standardised documentation with immediate effect in all public hospital mortuaries;
- (d) conducting staff training in July 2007 to reinforce a system in which staff vigilance and compliance with established procedures can be continuously sustained; and
- (e) encouraging early collection of deceased bodies by relatives to avoid overcrowding of mortuaries.

Deliberations of the Panel

5. The Panel discussed with the Administration and HA on 16 April and 11 June 2007 on the operation of public hospital mortuaries to prevent the occurrence of the PWH mortuary incident and similar incidents. Major views/concerns expressed by members and the Administration/HA's responses are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

6. Members were advised that HA all along had issued clear procedural guidelines on the identification and collection of bodies which, amongst others, stipulated that mortuary staff had to correctly record and double verify the personal information on the bracelet and 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.

Members were also advised that in the light of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary incident in March 2006 in which a deceased body was wrongly released to another family, HA had conducted an audit on "Operation of Mortuaries" in 10 hospitals in 2006. The findings revealed, amongst others, that the hospitals concerned, including PWH, had in place effective procedural guidelines regarding the identification and collection of bodies. Apart from internal auditing, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), as part of its normal corruption prevention work, had 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. HA had implemented the measures as far as possible.

7. Members expressed concern that due to the shortage of mortuary compartments in public hospitals, HA sometimes had to store two deceased bodies in the same mortuary compartment as had been done in the PWH incident.

8. HA advised that storing two bodies in the same mortuary compartment should not give rise to wrong release of deceased bodies. The PWH incident was mainly due to a failure by the mortuary staff concerned to follow through the procedural guidelines on identification of deceased bodies. HA further advised that it had initiated a mortuary expansion programme to address the capacity problem of its mortuaries. As interim measures, HA had, since the PWH incident, put up notices in all public hospital mortuaries to inform the public that sharing of compartments might be necessary if the mortuaries exceeded 100% utilisation. Notwithstanding, mortuary staff would personally inform families of the deceased patients if sharing of compartments was required. Should these families not wish the bodies of their deceased relatives to share the compartments, arrangement would be made to transfer the bodies to other HA mortuaries with spare capacity. While HA would endeavour to monitor more closely the utilisation of mortuary compartments, sharing of one compartment by two bodies over peak periods might still be inevitable before completion of the long term mortuary expansion programme. However, HA would refrain from storing two bodies of the opposite sex in the same mortuary compartment.

9. The Administration pointed out that if the capacity of public hospital mortuaries remained tight despite the enhancement of mortuary capacity, consideration might be given to introducing charges on the storage of deceased bodies in HA mortuaries exceeding a reasonable time period. Hon LI Fung-ying opined that such a move would only increase the financial burden on families of the deceased, and would not be helpful in alleviating the heavy demand during peak periods.

10. Hon WONG Kwok-hing asked whether consideration could be given to double-decking the mortuary compartments in HA hospitals, as had been done in the public mortuaries, to expeditiously enhance the mortuary capacity of HA hospitals. The Administration replied that this was not feasible, as the design of HA mortuaries and public mortuaries was different.

Relevant papers

11. Members are invited to access the Legislative Council website (<http://www.legco.gov.hk>) for details of the relevant papers and minutes of the meetings.

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