

立法會
Legislative Council

LC Paper No. CB(2)494/09-10(07)

Ref : CB2/PL/HS

Panel on Health Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 14 December 2009**

Health and Health Services Research Fund

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Health Services (the Panel) on the Administration's proposals to increase the approved commitment for the Health and Health Services Research Fund (the Fund).

Background

2. In 1994, the then Health and Welfare Bureau established the Health Services Research Fund (HSRF) to fund research on health services with a capital commitment of \$50 million. A review of the HSRF in 2001 resulted in the identification of new priority research themes based on local relevance and importance, and the research agenda was refocused in the light of this new knowledge. In 2002, a decision was taken to wind up the HSRF and a new commitment of \$10 million for the Fund was approved by the Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury under delegated authority.

3. To be eligible for a grant under the Fund, the proposed research project must be of high scientific merit and of potential local application and benefit. The Fund calls for applications once per year. Each application will be subjected to a two-tiered peer review process. In line with international experience, the criteria for vetting applications is centred on the following broad principles -

- (a) degree of correlation with the priority of the Fund;
- (b) scientific quality of the proposed research project;
- (c) track record and research capacity of the applicant/applying institution; and
- (d) scientific opportunity in terms of potential to improve human health and health services.

4. A Research Council was established under the Fund to make final decision on the allocation of the Fund. It is chaired by the Secretary for Food and Health. Members include representatives from the Department of Health, Hospital Authority, academic institutions and private sector.

Past discussions

5. At the meeting on 31 January 2005, the Administration sought the Panel's support for the proposal to increase the approved commitment for the Fund by \$16 million (from \$10 million to \$26 million) to allow the Fund to issue a further two to three rounds of applications from 2005 to 2007. Members expressed support for the proposal, and the proposal was approved by the Finance Committee (FC) of the Legislative Council (LegCo) on 25 February 2005.

6. On 1 June 2007, the Administration sought the Panel's support for the proposal to increase the approved commitment for the Fund by \$40 million (from \$26 million to \$66 million). This would allow the Fund to issue a further five annual open calls of applications from 2007 to 2011, both years inclusive.

7. Whilst expressing support for the Fund, some members hoped that priority of funding could be accorded to projects targeted at screening services for mental health, chronic diseases, and infectious diseases such as hepatitis B.

8. The Administration advised that three thematic priorities, namely, public health, health services and Chinese medicine, had been developed by the Research Council to guide the direction of research and decisions on fund allocation. Screening services for public health and mental health fell under the scope of the thematic priority of health services. Notwithstanding the aforesaid, all worthy proposals would be supported even if the focus of the projects was outside the scope of the thematic priorities of the Fund and/or there was insufficient funding. In the case where there was insufficient funding to support all worthy projects, the Administration would seek FC's support to increase the commitment of the Fund.

9. Noting the importance of health-related research, members unanimously urged the Administration to increase the Fund's approved commitment from its originally proposed \$40 million to \$50 million to take into account the effect of inflation over the next five years. The Administration accepted members' proposal, and the proposal to increase \$50 million in the approved commitment for the Fund was approved by FC on 15 June 2007.

Latest development

10. Subsequent to the meeting on 1 June 2007, the Administration advised the Panel in writing on 12 February 2008 that since the establishment of the Fund in 2002, five open calls had been issued. A total of 63 projects worth \$26.47 million were approved in the first four rounds. There are two types of awards : full grants and mini-grants. The

mini-grants are intended for small-scale, non-renewable pilot studies and their size of funding is significantly lower than that of full grants. Among these 63 supported projects, 55 were full grants and eight were mini-grants. On average, \$470,558 was granted for each full grant project whereas \$73,752 was granted for each mini-grant project. The Administration further advised that to date, all projects that were considered worthy of support by the Research Council were funded. No worthy project had been denied support due to a lack of funds, although the funding for three applications submitted in 2006 were only confirmed in 2007 due to insufficient funding in the interim period.

Relevant papers

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

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8 December 2009