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Panel on Health Services

**Updated background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the special meeting on 8 August 2011**

**Healthcare Reform Second Stage Public Consultation
- Health Protection Scheme**

Purpose

This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Health Services ("the Panel") on the Health Protection Scheme ("HPS").

Background

2. The Health and Medical Development Advisory Committee ("HMDAC") released a consultation paper entitled "Building a Healthy Tomorrow" in July 2005 on the future service delivery model of the healthcare system. While the respondents expressed diverse views on the proposed service delivery model, the majority of them agreed that it was high time to review the healthcare system to ensure its sustainability. In March 2008, the Government put forth a package of inter-related proposals for reform in the First Stage Healthcare Reform Consultation Document entitled "Your Health your Life". The Consultation Document aimed at garnering the views of the public on the key principles and concepts of four proposals on the healthcare service reform, and the pros and cons of reforming the current healthcare financing arrangements through introducing six possible supplementary financing options: (a) social health insurance (mandatory contribution by workforce); (b) out-of-pocket payments (increasing user fees); (c) medical savings accounts (mandatory savings for future use); (d) voluntary private health insurance ("PHI"); (e) mandatory PHI; and (f) personal healthcare reserve (mandatory savings and insurance).

3. To tie in with the proposals, the Government would increase government expenditure on healthcare from 15% to 17% of the overall recurrent government expenditure by 2011-2012. The Financial Secretary also pledged in the

2008-2009 Budget to draw \$50 billion from the fiscal reserves to take forward the healthcare reform, after the supplementary financing arrangements had been finalized for implementation.

4. The report on the first stage consultation on healthcare reform was released in December 2008. According to the Administration, despite the divergent views on healthcare financing, there was a general willingness among the public and stakeholders to continue deliberations on the issue of healthcare financing with a view to finding a solution. On 6 October 2010, the Government published the Healthcare Reform Second Stage Public Consultation Document entitled "My Health My Choice" in which a government-regulated, voluntary HPS, aiming at enhancing the long-term sustainability of the healthcare system, was proposed for public consultation. Under the proposal, insurers participating in HPS were required to offer standardized health insurance plans in accordance with the core requirements and specifications ("Standard Plans"). Participating insurers were also required to comply with scheme rules and requirements specified under HPS. There were 10 key features of HPS as follows -

- (a) no turn-away of subscribers and guaranteed renewal for life;
- (b) age-banded premiums subject to adjustment guidelines;
- (c) covering pre-existing medical conditions subject to waiting period and time-limited reimbursement limits;
- (d) high-risk individuals insurable with a cap on premium loading (say 200%);
- (e) sharing risks arising from accepting high-risk groups through High-Risk Pool industry reinsurance;
- (f) offering no-claim discount up to 30% of published premiums;
- (g) providing insurance plans renewable on leaving employment and portable between insurers;
- (h) requiring the insurers to report all costs, claims and expenses;
- (i) providing standardized health insurance policy terms and definitions; and
- (j) establishing a Government-regulated health insurance claims arbitration mechanism.

5. The Healthcare Reform Second Stage Public Consultation Report was released on 11 July 2011. According to the Administration, members of the public supported regulating PHI and healthcare services through introducing HPS to improve market transparency, promote healthy competition, and enhance consumer protection. A three-pronged action plan would be adopted to take forward HPS, which included establishing a high level Steering Committee on Strategic Review on Healthcare Manpower Planning and Professional Development ("the Steering Committee") to conduct a strategic review on healthcare manpower planning and professional development; setting up a Working Group on HPS to formulate detailed proposals on the supervisory and institutional frameworks for HPS; and taking measures to facilitate the development of healthcare services and infrastructure. The Administration's plan was to complete the preparatory works by the first half of 2013, then proceed to draft and introduce HPS legislation, as appropriate. The implementation of HPS would take place the earliest in 2015.

Deliberations of the Panel

6. The Panel held four meetings to discuss the proposed HPS and received the views of deputations at one meeting. The deliberations and concerns of members are summarized below.

Rationale and scheme concept of HPS

7. Members noted that one of the key features of HPS was the guaranteed acceptance of all applicants, including the high-risk groups such as the elderly and those with pre-existing medical conditions who were being excluded or priced out in the existing PHI market. Question was raised as to whether improving the existing PHI market through regulatory intervention by the Government was the primary objective of the proposed HPS.

8. The Administration advised that the first stage public consultation held in 2008 reflected that the majority of the public had reservations about mandatory financing options and preferred having their own voluntary choices of healthcare protection. They expected more choices of private healthcare services according to their own means and needs, as an alternative to public healthcare services. In the light of this, the proposed HPS aimed to make available government-regulated health insurance to provide better choices to those who chose private healthcare services by enhancing consumer protection, price-transparency, quality assurance and market competition in both PHI and private healthcare markets. It also aimed to ease the pressure on the public healthcare system by encouraging more people to use private healthcare on a sustainable basis, and enhance the sustainability of the entire healthcare system, thus benefiting those who depended on the public system for their healthcare

needs.

9. Some members held another view that a public entity should be set up to offer health insurance plans under HPS to ensure compliance with the HPS requirements, set the benchmarks for health insurance plans under HPS as well as avoid oligopoly and promote competition.

10. The Administration advised that at this juncture, its role should be restricted to improving the existing private insurance services and supervising the implementation of HPS to safeguard consumer interests. There was concern from members of the public that any involvement of the Government in the health insurance market would result in crowding out other private insurers. The Administration however would not rule out the option of setting up a public entity to offer health insurance plans should there be a general lack of interests from the industry in offering health insurance plans under HPS or should the market not be performing efficiently and effectively.

11. Some members were of the view that the implementation of HPS would increase medical costs and drive up medical inflation, leading to premium escalation and benefiting the participating insurers and private healthcare providers.

12. The Administration advised that the implementation of HPS would help achieve the goal of making healthcare services more transparent and address the significant public-private imbalance in Hong Kong's healthcare system. The Administration would continue its efforts in containing medical costs, and patients would not be denied of proper medical care due to a lack of means following the implementation of HPS.

Benefit coverage of Standard Plans

13. Members noted that HPS Plans would be required to provide coverage for medical conditions requiring hospital admission or ambulatory procedures; the associated specialist out-patient consultations and investigations as well as the advanced diagnostic imaging services; and chemotherapy or radiotherapy for cancer. Noting the call from many deputations for extending the benefit coverage of HPS to out-patient services, some members further suggested that the benefit coverage of HPS should also be extended to cover the first specialist consultation in general as well as physiotherapy that entailed high cost.

14. The Administration explained that it did not propose to include primary care as a core requirement under HPS because primary care was relatively more affordable and out-patient demand was far more predictable than in-patient needs. The inclusion of primary care under HPS might also lead to premium escalation. HPS was designed to be modular and insurers participating in HPS

could offer other health insurance plans with top-up benefits and add-on components to cover such services. The public healthcare system would also provide a safety net of last resort for patients in need.

Savings for future premium

15. There was concern on the affordability of HPS. To better enable people to afford continuous health protection under HPS at older age when they needed it most, there was a suggestion that consideration should be given to creating a medical savings component under the Mandatory Provident Fund.

16. The Administration advised that taking into account the need to encourage the insured to stay on and to secure a pool of funding to cover future healthcare protection especially at old age, it had proposed for public consultation three options to encourage savings: (a) required in-policy savings; (b) optional savings accounts; and (c) premium rebate for long-stay. The Administration was open-minded on building in a medical savings component under the Mandatory Provident Fund to encourage savings by individuals for paying future premium at older age.

Subscription

17. Noting that HPS might lack the critical mass to be financially viable if it was unable to attract a substantial number of subscribers, question was raised on the number of subscribers to make HPS sustainable.

18. The Administration estimated that around several hundred thousands subscribers would make HPS sustainable. At present, around 2.42 million people in Hong Kong were covered by PHI. Some of them might choose to migrate to HPS plans. To attract individuals especially the young and healthy people to join HPS Plans, the Administration proposed the provision of Government incentives for all new joiners of HPS Plans to enjoy maximum no-claim discount immediately upon joining HPS, or to encourage savings by individuals under HPS for paying future premium at older age.

Service provision based on packaged charging

19. It was proposed that HPS Plans would be required to set reimbursement levels based on "diagnosis-related groups" ("DRG") packaged charging where available, thereby enhancing transparency and certainty of medical charges to the insured. Some members cast doubt over the ability of the Government to ensure an adequate supply of private healthcare services based on DRG packaged charging.

20. The Administration considered that DRG-based payment systems would work well in Hong Kong as they had been practised in other advanced economies for some 20 years. In addition, the new private hospitals to be developed at the four pieces of land earmarked for private hospital development (at Wong Chuk Hang, Tseung Kwan O, Tung Chung and Tai Po respectively) would also be required to provide services at DRG packaged charging in support of the implementation of HPS.

Use of the \$50 billion fiscal reserve earmarked to support healthcare reform

21. Members expressed diverse views on the Government's proposal to make use of the \$50 billion earmarked in the fiscal reserves to take forward HPS. Some members welcomed the proposal to make use of the \$50 billion to attract people to subscribe HPS while other members had reservations about the suitability of using the reserves to subsidize people who had already bought PHI to migrate to an HPS plan. Some members suggested that the Government should use the \$50 billion on the public healthcare system to address the manpower shortage problem, instead of supporting the uptake of PHI. There was also a view that offering a tax deduction for the premiums, instead of making use of the \$50 billion to provide fiscal incentives under HPS, could serve the same purpose of increasing the uptake of HPS Plans.

22. The Administration advised that it was open-minded on the offering of tax deduction for HPS premiums. It was the Administration's vision for healthcare reform to strengthen the public system serving as a safety net for the whole population, complemented by a private healthcare sector providing value-for-money choices to members of the public. The Administration however pointed out that if the \$50 billion was not used to provide scheme incentives such as allowing high-risk individuals to join HPS Plans without requiring other healthy insured to pay excessive premium, it might not be able to ensure viability or achieve the objectives of HPS.

Supervisory framework for HPS

23. Casting doubt on the ability of the Government to effectively regulate the profit and surcharge of the insurers under HPS, some members were concerned whether there would be government control over the setting of the premium and administration fee of the Standard Plan under HPS to avoid the driving up of medical costs. In particular, some members pointed out that some individual healthcare service providers might charge different fees for insured and non-insured patients. There was a need for the Administration to allay the concern of the public on the non-transparent and highly variable charges by private practitioners.

24. The Administration responded that measures underpinned by legislation would be developed to require the participating insurers and private healthcare service providers to be transparent in the setting and adjustment of premiums, insurance costs and medical charges. Key stakeholders, including the insurance sector, would be engaged to steer the formulation of proposals for HPS. The Administration however expressed reservations about regulating the ratio of administrative fee through legislation as such an arrangement would reduce competition and might result in a situation that all insurers would set their administrative fee at the maximum permitted level.

Healthcare capacity and manpower

25. Members were concerned about the capacity of the private healthcare sector to cope with the increase in demand arising from the implementation of HPS.

26. The Administration advised that the known redevelopment projects of existing private hospitals and the development of new private hospitals under planning would double the number of hospital beds in the private sector in five to seven years' time, thus enabling the sector to meet the projected demand for private healthcare services arising from HPS.

27. There was grave concern that an expansion of the private healthcare sector would lead to an increasing number of experienced doctors in the Hospital Authority ("HA") switching to the private hospitals, undermining the ability of HA to cater for needy patients who had to depend on the public system for their healthcare needs.

28. The Administration advised that while some specialties of HA recorded a higher turnover in the past year, the annual turnover rate of doctors in HA was within the normal range of 3% to 5%. As an important role of HA was to train healthcare professionals for the territory, turnover was natural as some of these professionals may choose leave HA after training. The Administration assured members that a steady increase in the supply of healthcare personnel would be expected in the coming years, as there would be an enhanced supply of medical and nurse graduates by 2015.

29. The Administration further advised that a strategic review would be conducted by the Steering Committee which comprised, among others, renowned overseas experts, local dignitaries of healthcare professions, officials from the Education Bureau and representatives from the publicly-funded institutions providing training for healthcare professionals. The Steering Committee would assess manpower needs in the various healthcare professions, and review the existing professional standards and regulatory structure for various healthcare professions. It would formulate its recommendations by the

first half of 2013.

30. Noting that the terms of reference of the Steering Committee would include reviewing the existing regulatory structure for healthcare professions, some members were concerned about the change to the existing regulatory structure to be brought about by the strategic review. In particular, they were concerned whether the strategic review would seek to bring about change to the principle of professional autonomy of the healthcare professions and the role of HA in healthcare manpower planning and development.

31. The Administration advised that the review was not aimed to change the principle of professional autonomy of the healthcare professions or the role of HA. The Steering Committee would review and identify areas requiring attention under the existing regulatory structures, including those concerning complaints and regulation of professional conduct in the existing mechanisms of the statutory regulatory bodies. It would also formulate plans to ensure manpower supply and professional qualities to meet future needs of both public and private healthcare sectors.

Relevant papers

32. A list of the relevant papers on the Legislative Council website is in the **Appendix**.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
5 August 2011

**Relevant papers on
Healthcare Reform Second Stage Public Consultation
- Health Protection Scheme**

Committee	Date of meeting	Paper
Panel on Health Services	6.10.2010 (Item I)	Agenda
Panel on Health Services	11.12.2010 (Item I)	Agenda
Panel on Health Services	13.12.2010 (Item IV)	Agenda Minutes
Panel on Health Services	11.7.2011 (Item II)	Agenda

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