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Panel on Health Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 8 November 2010**

Operation of public mortuaries

Purpose

1. This paper gives an account of the past discussions by the Panel on Health Services ("the Panel") on the operation of public mortuaries.

Background

2. According to the Coroners Ordinance (Cap. 504), deaths caused by an accident or violence, a crime or under suspicious circumstances, etc. should be reported to the Coroner. When a reportable death occurs, the body is sent to either a hospital or a public mortuary, where the pathologist conducts an external examination of the body. If the cause of death can be ascertained, the pathologist will report the findings of the examination and the cause of death to the Coroner and recommend waiver of autopsy. The Coroner will consider the pathologist's report and, depending on the case, decide whether to order an autopsy or a waiver.

3. Under section 5 of the Coroners Ordinance, the Secretary for Food and Health may, by order published in the Gazette, set apart places to be mortuaries for the reception of bodies for the purpose of autopsies and provide or arrange for the management of such places. At present, there are three public mortuaries operated by the Forensic Pathology Service of the Department of Health ("DH"). They are the Victoria Public Mortuary built in 1972, the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary built in 2005 and the Fu Shan Public Mortuary built in 1989. Their respective body storage capacity as at March 2010 is 70, 220 and 168. According to the Administration, the storage capacity of the Fu Shan Public Mortuary will be increased by 48 compartments to 216 in 2010-2011. In 2009, the average utilization rates of the Victoria Public Mortuary, the Kwai Chung Public Mortuary and the Fu Shan Public Mortuary were 65%, 72% and 85% respectively. The Kowloon Public Mortuary, which is designated for contingency use, will receive bodies when the other mortuaries have reached full capacity.

Deliberations of the Panel

4. The Panel held two meetings on 19 July 2005 and 31 March 2006 respectively to discuss the operation and services of public mortuaries. The deliberations and concerns of members are summarized below.

Staff compliance with the operation guidelines

5. When discussing the measures taken by the Administration to address the wide public concern about the media reports on bodies being placed and piled up on the floor of the public mortuaries on 19 July 2005, members noted that DH had refined the operation guidelines to provide, among other things, details on the proper handling of bodies for public mortuary staff. The need for orderly and dignified handling of bodies was also stressed and reiterated. Members raised concern about staff compliance with the operation guidelines.

6. The Administration advised that the refined operation guidelines had been promulgated and become effective on 18 July 2005. The guidelines specified the proper practices and procedures to be followed under normal circumstances. Both the management and the staff sides, including workers and their supervisors, had regular meetings and discussions on the practice and procedures. In exigency situations where there were difficulties in handling the bodies with the available facilities, the staff would seek instructions from their supervisors or the Forensic Pathologist-in-charge.

7. At the meeting on 31 March 2006, members expressed disappointment that despite the measures taken by the Administration to ensure staff compliance with the refined operation guidelines, some staff members had not followed them. Negligence by two mortuary staff members had led to a mix-up of a dead body at the Fu Shan Public Mortuary on 4 March 2006 whereby the body of a 90-year-old man was mistakenly claimed and cremated by the family of another deceased person ("the incident"). Members called on the Administration to assure the public that the public mortuary staff would improve their attitude and treat the dead bodies with respect.

8. The Administration advised that a clear set of operation guidelines had already been in place. Subsequent to the incident, DH had immediately held a seminar to brief all mortuary staff again on the working procedures. Further training in this regard would soon commence. In response to members' concern as to whether the management had failed to properly perform their supervisory role, as demonstrated by the fact that it was not until the occurrence of the incident that the management realized the malfunction of the close-circuit television in the Fu Shan Public Mortuary, the Administration advised that DH had immediately reminded the medical staff to step up supervision and monitoring of compliance with the established procedures. To this end, a pressing task was to enhance internal audit, such as arranging frequent surprise checks by the Internal Audit Team.

9. Members noted that the Independent Committee on Public Mortuary Incident

("the Committee") set up by DH to inquire into the incident had recommended a package of short, medium and long term improvement measures in a number of areas including the staffing of mortuaries; training and supervision of mortuary staff; body identification procedures; and improvements to mortuary and funeral facilities (see **Appendix**). Some members queried whether these recommendations could be fully implemented, given the deep-rooted work culture of public mortuary staff.

10. The Administration stressed that it attached great importance to enhancing the quality of services of public mortuaries. After the media report on the capacity of public mortuaries and the related issues in mid-2005, staff members of mortuaries were reminded to be considerate towards family members of the deceased. Communications between the management and frontline staff had been strengthened and experience sharing sessions and workshops had been organized with a view to altering the traditional work culture of public mortuary staff.

Staffing of public mortuaries

11. Members were of the view that additional manpower would be required for implementing the measures recommended by the Committee to improve the operation of public mortuaries. Of particular concern to members was the arrangement for only one Mortuary Attendant to be on duty from 5 pm to 9 am the following morning with no support or supervision.

12. The Administration explained that the planning of the duty roster had taken into account the workload of different time periods. In addition, clerical posts had been created to handle duties at registration counters so that the other mortuary staff could concentrate on the technical duties. The Administration further explained that for the period from 5 pm to 9 am the following morning, the main responsibility of the Mortuary Attendant on duty was to receive bodies of those whose cause of death had to be ascertained, such as sudden deaths and deaths caused by accident, murder and suicide. In such cases, the public officers or the police officers in charge of the cases would provide support to the Mortuary Attendant. Notwithstanding the Administration's explanation, members maintained the view that there was a lack of adequate manpower to ensure effective operation of public mortuary services.

13. There was a view that some of the services provided by public mortuaries could be outsourced. There was also a suggestion that consideration should be given to reviewing the existing organizational structure of public mortuaries where the Forensic Pathologists, whose expertise was in forensic pathology and clinical forensic medicine, should also be tasked with the responsibility of monitoring the operation of mortuaries. The Administration advised that the Mortuary Officer of each Division would provide support to Forensic Pathologists on the management of mortuaries. Measures had also been put in place to strengthen middle management.

Strive for professionalism in the management and daily operation of public mortuaries

14. Members sought information on the work plan of the Administration to take forward the Committee's recommendation to strive for professionalism, such as reviewing staff establishment, remuneration as well as staff training, in order to attract the talents to join the profession. The Administration advised that it would shortly discuss its work plan to establish a trained and professional cadre of mortuary staff. More information on overseas experience, such as that of the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, would be obtained for reference.

Recent developments

Progress made in taking forward the recommendations of the Committee

15. Subsequent to the meeting on 31 March 2006, the Administration advised the Panel in writing on 6 July 2007 the progress made in taking forward the medium and long-term measures recommended by the Committee. The Administration advised, among other things, that -

- (a) key operational features in the Mortuary Work Manual had been strengthened and would be regularly reviewed to provide clear guidance to staff. Training had been strengthened to enhance the staff's knowledge on proper procedures;
- (b) apart from deploying clerical staff to undertake registration counter duties at the mortuaries, additional mortuary staff posts would be created to strengthen the manpower of the public mortuaries. In addition, various improvements had been launched to enhance operational efficiency in the mortuaries, including computerization and a revamp of the body identification workflow; and
- (d) a professional consultant was commissioned to design and deliver a series of tailor-made training programmes on concepts and skills for quality-oriented service to all levels of staff in the Forensic Pathology Service of DH. Besides, management briefings and on-the-job training were conducted to equip the Medical Officers, Mortuary Officers and Mortuary Technicians with the necessary supervisory skills and familiarize them with their respective management responsibilities. Mortuary staff members were also required to take regular job-related proficiency tests.

A wrong autopsy incident at the Fu Shan Public Mortuary on 19 October 2010

16. On 20 October 2010, DH announced an incident at the Fu Shan Public Mortuary on 19 October 2010 whereby an autopsy was mistakenly conducted on the body of a 77-year-old woman whose autopsy had been waived by the Coroner. Immediately after the incident, DH launched a comprehensive investigation into the incident. Meanwhile, mortuary staff members had been instructed to strictly check bodies which required

autopsies only against Coroner's autopsy order. Medical officers were also required to recheck bodies against both the autopsy order as well as case notes before moving on to perform autopsies. In addition, a Duty Medical Officer system had been introduced in the autopsy room of all public mortuaries to enhance supervision.

Relevant papers

17. 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.

Council Business Division 2
Legislative Council Secretariat
5 November 2010

**Improvement measures recommended by the
Independent Committee on Public Mortuary**

Short-term measures

(i) Staff establishment, training and management

(a) Create clerical posts to handle duties at registration counters

- Make sure that the family of the deceased has made a positive identification of the dead body before signing the Certificate of Body Collection
- Avoid frequent rushing in and out of Mortuary Attendants between the lobby and the infection control areas

(b) Strengthen middle management

- Mortuary Officers and Mortuary Technicians should be well aware of their duties of enhancing supervision over the work of Mortuary Attendants
- Mortuary Officers should be mainly responsible for assisting the supervision of the overall performance of all levels of subordinates while Mortuary Technicians should focus on supervising the technical standard of staff
- Provide management training so that strict requirements and assessments can be made on frontline management

(c) Review the duty roster of staff

- Ensure that staff arrangements meet the demand in different time periods while attending to employees' right and need of taking leave
- Special attention should be paid to the period from 5 pm to 9 am the following morning as there is only one frontline staff member on duty with no support or supervision

(d) Enhance staff training

- Enhance on-the-job training for frontline staff
- Arrange briefing activities when notices and guidelines are promulgated
- Before computerization is implemented in all public mortuaries, staff training and practice should be strengthened with appropriate assessments so as to ensure that they are equipped with the necessary skills

(e) Enhance internal audit

- Frequent surprise checks should be arranged by the Internal Audit Team
- Monitor the operation in public mortuaries through the CCTV surveillance system
- Review staff establishment and facilities of public mortuaries on a regular basis to ensure that they have sufficient resources to provide services meeting public demands

(ii) Facilities and services

- (a) Reform the numbering system of body racks
- Reform the numbering system of body racks to ensure that all three-digit numbers for the racks in the cold rooms do not duplicate (e.g. A001-032 for Cold Room A, and B033-B066 for Cold Room B)
 - Use different colours for the doors of and the floors and walls inside different cold rooms for easy identification
 - Use different colours for the labels on the Body Rack Laminated Record Sheet of body racks to indicate different cold rooms
- (b) Prevent access to controlled areas in public mortuaries by unauthorized persons
- Step up security measures in controlled areas such as corridors outside cold rooms, passageways leading from the working area to the lobby and the rear entrance leading to the body identification and release area, in order to prevent unauthorized entry and damage as well as reducing the risk of infection and virus transmission
 - Provide an additional exit in the encoffining room on the wall leading outside for use by family members claiming dead bodies and funeral personnel; restrict the rear entrance previously shared by mortuary attendants, funeral personnel and families to mortuary staff only
 - Strictly forbid entry into controlled areas in public mortuaries by non-mortuary staff and unauthorized persons
 - Personal particulars of trespassers should be recorded clearly by mortuary staff
 - Inform staff formally that they should strictly follow the above measures and that non-compliance will be subject to disciplinary action
- (c) Expand the coverage of the CCTV surveillance system
- The CCTV surveillance system should cover all areas of security concern including entrances, working areas and the lobby; adjust the camera lens so that the facial appearance of subjects can be clearly filmed
 - Install the CCTV control unit in a locked room
 - Strengthen communication with staff to make them understand that the CCTV surveillance system is installed for preventing the entry of unauthorized persons and vandals on the one hand and safeguarding the personal safety of staff on the other, in particular during the 16-hour period from 5 pm to 9 am the following morning when only staff member is on duty. Moreover, in the event of unreasonable complaints, the CCTV surveillance system can provide video clips to prove innocence and uphold justice for dedicated and loyal staff
- (d) Provide bereavement counselling service
- Appropriate area should be allocated in public mortuaries for volunteer organizations invited to offer bereavement counselling service to families of the deceased. Such organization can provide the families with

assistance in handling emotional and social problems arising from the loss of their loved ones and also explain to them basic funeral procedures and relevant information

(e) Provide facilities for holding simple funeral ceremonies

- In order to cater for the needs of families of the deceased (such as those who will not hold the mourning ceremonies in funeral parlours but will take the dead bodies directly from public mortuaries to crematoria or cemeteries for various reasons, such as insufficient time in organizing the funeral ceremony, few number of relatives attending the ceremony or financial difficulties), the Department can provide additional facilities in public mortuaries for holding simple yet dignified ceremonies of last rites for the deceased after collection of dead bodies
- Existing related facilities in hospitals under the Hospital Authority, such as the facilities and operational arrangements of the Hall of Eternal Peace in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, are useful reference for the Department
- Currently, staff can hardly stop the families of the deceased from holding ceremonies after collection of the dead bodies in the external passageway outside the rear entrance of public mortuaries. Apart from obstructing the receipt and release of dead bodies, it causes inconvenience in the use of the rear entrance by other families members who come for body identification. The Department should allocate appropriate areas for simple funeral ceremonies to enable its staff to carry out the instructions by advising bereaved families to observe the rules

(iii) Procedures

(a) Improve procedures on body identification

- Make frequent records when dead bodies are received
- Take a photograph of the dead body upon its receipt at the public mortuary and put such photograph in the plastic bag holding the Dead Body Card for identity verification
- Allow claimers of dead bodies to be accompanied by other relatives during identification

(b) Step up an alert system on the utilization rate of body racks

- Set up an alert system which will give alert signs when the body racks in cold room of public mortuaries are about to exhaust so that the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department can be notified in advance to take relevant measures to transport new dead bodies found to other public mortuaries

(c) Put identification bracelets on the dead bodies at the scene where they are found

- Since several dead bodies may be found in one case, identification bracelets should be attached to the dead bodies with the process witnessed by the most senior police officer at the scene when they are found

- For the above cases where several dead bodies are involved, the Police will use the same station report number for different bodies. For identification purpose, the Police may consider adding letters like A, B, C at the end of the station report number
- (d) Improve the design of identification bracelets
 - Before implementation of computerization, wide identification bracelets should be used to make the handwritten information on them more eligible
- (e) Require endorsement for record updating and revision
 - If an officer updates or revises any records in the Mortuary Body Registration Book, he or she should make an endorsement and mark the date and time concerned
- (f) Set up an inter-departmental working group
 - The Hong Kong Police Force, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department as well as the Department of Health should form an inter-departmental standing working group with a view to enhancing mutual communication and exchanging views regularly on the arrangements on transportation and receipt of dead bodies. Besides, various departments should inform all frontline staff of such mechanism and encourage them to express their opinions via their supervisors or in anonymous ways for better coordination among these departments

(iv) Public education

- Enhance public education so as to enable members of the public to address the issues of hospice matters and bereavement with relevant basic information in hand. As the facilities of public mortuaries fail to keep up with our growing and ageing population, additional resources should be injected as soon as possible to build or improve mortuary facilities for ensuring smooth operation and continuous upgrading in public mortuaries so that expectations of the general public can be met

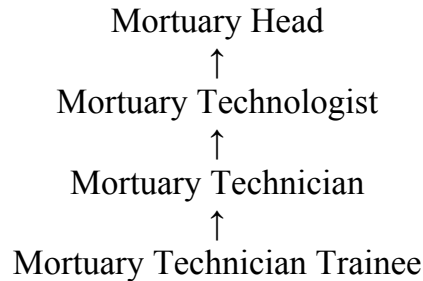
Medium-term and long-term measures

(i) Improve facilities in the lobby

- Play briefing videos for families waiting at the reception area to introduce procedures on body identification
- Recruit customer service officers to answer public enquiries
- Install the public address system to call families into the meeting room to undergo relevant formalities so that manpower can be saved

(ii) Strive for professionalism

- The Committee agrees with Prof Philip S L BEH, Associate Professor of the Pathology Department of the University of Hong Kong, that mortuary service has to be improved thoroughly. In the long run, we should make reference to overseas experience and establish a professional grade to undertake the management and daily operation of public mortuaries. The grade structure proposed by Prof BEH is as follows -



- Staff should be promoted only if they pass the relevant examinations. Enhanced service conditions and employment packages should be offered if employees of higher quality are to be recruited. Upon appointment, new recruits should be provided with structured training, including human anatomy, occupational safety, bereavement counselling and legislations on coroner's inquest and organ transplant
- The Committee looks forward to due recognition, respect and regard among the general public for mortuary work as this will promote the building up of a good service culture and ensure the provision of services fulfilling public expectations. In the long run, the public mortuary should not be a place of death alone and can be transformed into a place of hope and health promotion. Take the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine in Melbourne, Australia as an example. The Institute is not only a public mortuary, it also provide tissue and organ donation and harvest facilities, genetic counselling, bereavement counselling and a site for the coroner, thus enabling the provision of more comprehensive services to the public. Developing visions and directions of a similar nature will help attract talents and promote professionalism and professional advancement. As a result, employees at different levels will develop pride for their contribution at work to our society, thus establishing a sense of self-realisation and the capacity for self-employment