

For discussion

on 21 March 2016

Legislative Council Panel on Health Services

Healthcare services for Elderly People with Hearing Difficulty

Purpose

This paper outlines the healthcare services provided for elderly people with hearing difficulty.

Background

2. The elderly population aged 65 or above stands at approximately 1.07 million, representing about 15% of the overall population in Hong Kong¹. Given the lengthened life expectancy and low birth rate, and the fact that “baby-boomers” are approaching retirement age, the elderly population will continue to grow. According to the projection of the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD), the number of elderly people aged 65 or above will gradually increase to 36% (or 2.58 million) in 2064. The elderly population generally has greater demand for healthcare services than population from other age groups. The Government has implemented a range of measures over the years to provide various services to cater for the demand of the elderly people.

3. The 18 Elderly Health Centres established under the Department of Health (DH) provide integrated primary health care services including health assessment, health counselling, medical treatment and health education for elderly members aged 65 or above. In 2015, the Elderly Health Centres conducted health assessments for about 42 000 elderly members in total.

4. On the other hand, the Hospital Authority (HA) provides general outpatient service for the public. Patients (including the elderly) suffering from episodic disease such as influenza and cold can reserve consultation timeslots for the next 24 hours through the telephone appointment system. To ensure the elderly can obtain timely medical services, the general outpatient clinics (GOPCs) of HA have reserved special quotas for elders. As for patients who

¹ The figure was based on the latest estimation by the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) in 2014.

suffer from chronic disease and require follow-up, they will be assigned a visit timeslot for the next consultation and do not need to call to make separate appointments. To improve the services, HA will increase the quota for GOPCs by 27 000 attendances for 2016-17 and 49 000 additional attendances per year thereafter.

5. HA has also set up the Community Geriatric Assessment Teams (CGATs) which provide, through regular visits to residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs), medical and nursing care to residents with severe or complicated conditions and poor mobility status who are unable to visit the specialist outpatient clinics. CGATs also provide carers in RCHEs with training on nursing skills to help them take care of frail residents. HA will continue to expand the services of CGATs to cover more RCHEs.

6. As the healthcare safety net for Hong Kong people, the public healthcare system provides the elderly and other members of the public with access to healthcare services at highly subsidised rates. Besides, HA has put in place a medical fee waiver mechanism to assist elders and other patients who cannot afford the public healthcare service charges owing to financial difficulties and have passed the eligibility assessment.

7. To further enhance elderly care, the Government launched the Elderly Health Care Voucher Pilot Scheme in 2009 to subsidise Hong Kong elders aged 70 or above to use private primary care services. The scheme enables the elders to choose private healthcare services that best suit their needs, including dental and other preventive care service. It also serves the purpose of supplementing existing public healthcare services. The scheme was converted from a pilot project into a regular programme in January 2014 and the annual voucher amount for an eligible elder has been doubled to \$2,000 since June 2014.

Healthcare services for elderly people with hearing difficulty

8. According to a survey on persons with disabilities and chronic diseases conducted by C&SD in 2013, about 117 600 persons aged 65 or above

have hearing difficulty². The Government provides various services for persons with hearing difficulty (including the elders).

9. The services provided by the Elderly Health Centres of DH include hearing assessments conducted by doctors. The Elderly Health Centres will refer elders with hearing difficulty to the specialist outpatient clinics of HA for follow-up as necessary. Doctors of GOPCs of HA will also refer patients with hearing difficulty to the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department for follow-up treatment according to their clinical conditions and needs.

10. The ENT departments of HA provide appropriate assessment and treatment for persons with hearing difficulty, including audiological assessment, hearing aid prescription and fitting service and remedial treatment service. In 2015, HA provided audiological services to a total of about 8 000 inpatient audiology attendances and 80 000 outpatient audiology attendances.

11. HA provides, through the Samaritan Fund (SF) safety net, financial assistance for needy patients who have met the specified clinical criteria and passed the means test to meet the expenses for designated Privately Purchased Medical Items or new technologies required in the course of medical treatment which are not covered by the standard fees and charges in public hospitals and clinics. The basic items supported by SF include hearing aids, and the replacement of external speech processors of cochlear implants and other accessories. Needy patients who have met the specified clinical requirements will be referred to SF for financial assistance.

12. Under the Elderly Health Care Voucher Scheme, eligible elders can use health care vouchers to pay for healthcare services provided by healthcare professionals enrolled in the scheme, including the clinical hearing assessment provided by enrolled doctors³.

² “Persons with hearing difficulty” refer to those who perceived themselves as having long-term difficulty in hearing or were using specialised hearing aids or rehabilitation tools at the time of survey.

³ At present, there are ten types of healthcare professionals who are eligible for joining the scheme. They include medical practitioners, Chinese medicine practitioners, dentists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, medical laboratory technologists, radiographers, nurses, chiropractors and optometrists with Part I registration under the Supplementary Medical Professions Ordinance (Cap. 359). Health care vouchers cannot be used solely for purchasing products such as medications and medical equipment. As audiologists and audiology technicians are currently not subject to statutory registration, the vouchers cannot be used for services provided by them.

13. HA and DH provide integrated and multi-disciplinary assessment and treatment for persons with hearing difficulty. The healthcare professionals involved include general practitioners and specialists in ENT as well as relevant allied health professionals. There are currently 29 audiologists and audiology technicians in HA. They provide timely hearing tests and treatment according to the diagnosis made by ENT specialists and the needs of patients. HA will closely monitor the staffing situation to ensure an adequate supply of healthcare manpower to serve the public.

14. Since audiologists and audiology technicians do not belong to the 13 types of healthcare professionals who are subject to statutory registration before they can practise in Hong Kong, the Government does not have an accurate number of these two types of personnel serving in Hong Kong. In 2014, the DH conducted a Health Manpower Survey on healthcare personnel, the responding institutions employed a total of 93 audiologists and 31 audiology technicians.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to note the contents of this paper.

**Food and Health Bureau
Hospital Authority
Department of Health
March 2016**