

**For discussion on
13 September 2021**

Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services

Support Services for Students with Hearing Impairment

Purpose

This paper provides information to Members on the support services provided by the Government and the Hospital Authority (HA) for students with hearing impairment.

Identification and Assessment Mechanism

2. To facilitate early identification of children with hearing impairment, Neonatal units of the HA would provide universal newborn hearing screening programme using the Automated Auditory Brainstem Response to babies born in the public hospitals while the Maternal and Child Health Centres of the Department of Health (DH) would provide Automated Otoacoustic Emission hearing screening test to those newborns who have not been screened in their birthing hospital. Babies suspected to have hearing impairment will be referred to ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist for further assessment and follow-up.
3. As to children studying at schools, Student Health Service of DH provides preliminary hearing screening for primary one and secondary two students or other students with suspected hearing problems identified during the annual health check. If necessary, DH will arrange students to undergo further hearing test to confirm the nature and severity of their hearing impairment. The students concerned would be triaged according to their needs or referred to various service agencies such as ENT clinics of HA and the Educational Audiology Service Section of the Education Bureau (EDB) for follow-up and intervention provided by relevant professionals.
4. In addition, in respect of children under 12 years of age who are suspected to have development problems, the Child Assessment Service (CAS) of DH provides comprehensive assessment (including hearing assessment). CAS would provide interim support services for parents in need, such as talks, workshops and parental training courses, to help them

understand their children’s conditions so that better care and early intervention could be given accordingly. For confirmed cases, CAS will make referral according to the needs and family situations of the children with hearing impairment to ENT Specialist for further diagnosis and treatment. Subject to the consent of parents, CAS will also refer the pre-school children concerned to waitlist for the pre-school rehabilitation services subvented by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) and will deliver the report to EDB for hearing aid fitting and follow-up services.

Provision of Cochlear Implant and Hearing Aids

5. EDB attaches great importance to supporting students with hearing impairment. In the provision of hearing aids, EDB works jointly with HA. The audiologists of EDB provide hearing aid fitting services whereas HA provides services on cochlear implant or other implantable hearing devices. For children who need cochlear implant or implantable hearing device for one ear and hearing aid for the other, they are provided with services by HA.

Cochlear Implant

6. For children confirmed to be suffering from profound hearing impairment, HA will assess whether cochlear implant will further improve their hearing ability. If assessment results are affirmative and consents are obtained from their patients or guardians, HA will perform cochlear implant surgeries for them. The number of patients (under age 18) who received cochlear implant in the past three financial years is as follows:

Year	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	Total
Number of patients	45	38	54	137

7. Cochlear implant is made up of an implant and an external speech processor. Under normal circumstances, the implant can last for lifetime. The current supplier of cochlear implants of HA provides ten-year warranty for occasional malfunctioning of the implant. Within the warranty period, the supplier is responsible for repair and maintenance of the implant. In case the implant malfunctions after expiry of the warranty, since the implant has to be replaced together with the external speech processor, HA will provide the clinically eligible patients with a full set of cochlear implant at standard fees and charges.

8. As for external speech processors, like other medical items of similar nature (e.g. prostheses), they are not covered by the standard fees and charges of HA. The current supplier of external speech processors of HA provides three-year warranty. Upon expiry of the warranty period, patients are responsible for the repair and maintenance of the external speech processors.

9. HA provides, through the Samaritan Fund (SF), financial assistance for needy patients 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. Starting from April 2013, HA has included the replacement of external speech processors of cochlear implants in the non-drug items supported by SF to provide financial assistance to patients in need. When applying assistance from SF, apart from considering the patient's clinical and financial condition, SF might consider granting financial assistance on a discretionary basis if there are any special social factors / circumstances faced by the patient. HA will pay close attention to the latest developments of scientific and clinical evidence of relevant items, listen to the views and recommendations of patient groups, and review the eligibility and coverage of SF according to the established mechanism, so as to provide comprehensive support to patients in need.

Bone Anchored Hearing Aid (BAHA)

10. As for those children who require BAHA as assessed, HA will arrange the surgery for them. Currently, devices related to this procedure are not covered by the standard fees and charges in public hospitals, and the extra cost will be borne by patients at their own expenses. Starting from January 2020, BAHA has been included in the non-drug items supported by SF. Finance assistance will be provided to needy patients who have met the specified clinical criteria, being referred by attending doctor or allied health professionals for SF assistance, and passed the means test conducted by medical social workers.

Other Hearing Aids

11. For children who require hearing aid fitting services, EDB would invite parents to accompany their children to EDB for arrangement of free services upon receiving referrals. EDB would also provide parents with professional consultation and guidance for supporting their children with hearing impairment in the effective use of hearing aids. In general, the hearing aid fitting services would be completed in about four to six weeks. In the

provision of free hearing aid fitting services, in addition to the free-of-charge hearing aids and earmoulds, EDB would also provide regular check, adjustment, repair and maintenance services for hearing aids as well as modification and replacement services for earmoulds. Replacement of hearing aids will be arranged free of charge on a need basis after the use of the hearing aids by students for three years. In the 2020/21 school year, there are around 1300 primary and secondary students and pre-school children using hearing aids.

Rehabilitation Services for Pre-school Children

12. SWD provides subvented pre-school rehabilitation services for children from birth to the age of six who are assessed with hearing impairment and have not yet started primary school education. Services are provided by the Early Education and Training Centre, Integrated Programme in Kindergarten-cum Child Care Centre, Special Child Care Centre and On-site Pre-School Rehabilitation Services. Pre-school rehabilitation services specially designed for children with hearing impairment include intensive aural, pronunciation and language training to assist them to make use of their residual hearing to communicate in oral language in their early development stage. Sign language training is also provided based on the need of individual children.

Measures to Support Students with Hearing Impairment and Relevant Schools

13. The specialists in EDB will pay visits to schools to provide them with school-based support and consultation in facilitating the learning of the students with hearing impairment. Schools may apply for the Top-up Fund to procure the Wireless Transmission System for students with hearing impairment, in order to enhance their listening and communication effectiveness in class. Schools may also adopt the Learning Support Grant to employ teachers or teaching assistants who know sign language, or procure professional services, including sign language interpretation service for supporting the communication needs of students with hearing impairment who use sign language. Besides, through the Enhanced Support Service, the resource teachers of the school for children with hearing impairment would provide support to students with hearing impairment studying in ordinary schools. EDB has also developed various resource packages, information pamphlets and guidelines, e.g. Resource Package on “School-based Support for Students with Hearing Impairment” and Resource Package on “Hearing-

Impaired Students' Lexicon Learning", etc., to strengthen the knowledge and skills of teachers and parents in supporting students with hearing impairment.

Measures to Support Post-secondary Institutions Full-time Students with Hearing Impairment

14. Regarding the eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities, according to the information provided by universities to UGC, there are a total of 76 students with hearing impairment pursuing UGC-funded sub-degree and undergraduate programmes in the 2020/21 academic year. Pursuant to the prevailing funding arrangement, UGC-funded universities may all along deploy resources flexibly to support students with hearing impairment. To promote further efforts by universities on this front, UGC has, since 2015, allocated extra funding totalling \$70 million to strengthen universities' support to students with special educational needs, such as providing hearing aids to students with hearing impairment as needed and conducting sign language workshops.

Response to the Proposal of Providing Subsidy for Students to Purchase Hearing Aids

15. EDB has been very concerned about the quality and effectiveness of the hearing aid fitting services. EDB is open to the suggestion of providing cash subsidy for parents to purchase hearing aids for their children. In the past year or so, EDB has enquired with 380 parents for their opinions on hearing aid fitting services. The results showed that about 40% of the parents supported the provision of the services by EDB, about 10% of them considered that the services could be outsourced, about 20% expected the government to provide subsidies for parents to purchase hearing aids and the remaining 30% had no specific preference. As reflected by the parents' views, more parents supported the continued provision of the hearing aid fitting services by EDB.

16. In fact, through government procurement, goods and services could not only be obtained at a more reasonable price to ensure the proper use of public money, the inconvenience for parents to purchase hearing aids everywhere could also be eliminated. Moreover, EDB could effectively monitor the quality of hearing aids and related services to ensure meeting the needs of students with hearing impairment. According to the reviews conducted by the audiology consultants in 2019 and 2020, in general, both the specifications of the hearing aids issued by EDB and the hearing aid fitting

protocols met the professional requirements. On the contrary, the arrangement of cash subsidy may not be suitable: some parents may not be able to choose the optimal hearing aids for their children, or some parents may be easily influenced by various factors and purchase expensive hearing aids equipped with unnecessary functions. EDB will continue to explore the modes of provision of hearing aid fitting services through different channels and collect views from parents and students for review in due course.

Advice Sought

17. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

Education Bureau
Food and Health Bureau
Labour and Welfare Bureau
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