

**Letterhead of The Hong Kong Society of
Professional Optometrists
香港專業視光師學會的信頭**

The Hong Kong Society of Professional Optometrists

The Society was established in 1982 and with a current membership of around 250 optometrists who qualified from either the Hong Kong Polytechnic University or overseas institutions. All members are registered under the Optometrist Regulation of Supplementary Medical Professions Ordinance as either Part I or Part II optometrists. So the Society represents the largest group of formally trained optometrists in Hong Kong SAR.

The Society exists to promote the delivery of a high standard of vision and eye care to the Hong Kong public, to enhance the practice of Optometry and to educate the public as to the importance of proper vision care.

The Society welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the Harvard's Team Report on the Hong Kong health care system.

The Society wishes to comment on various sections of the report, pertaining particularly to the provision of visual health care in Hong Kong.

22 June, 1999

Submission

Background

- A. Optometrist has been identified as “a first contact primary care practitioner” who cares for functionally inadequate visual system. Optometrists are educated and trained in the normal and abnormal physiology of the eye and psychophysics of vision. Optometrists are trained to determine the health status and functional capability of the visual system with the use of some pharmaceutical agents. So optometrists can diagnose, treat and prescribe for conditions requiring visual training/therapy, preventive and corrective procedures and devices for alteration of vision anomalies.(1)(2)
- B. The Legislation of optometrists was enforced in Hong Kong on 1st April, 1996. Practicing optometrists are registered under Optometrists Regulation of Supplementary Medical Professions Ordinance (Chapter 359). With the advent of legislation governing optometric practice, the public is better served and protected in the area of vision and eye care.
- C. The Hong Kong Polytechnic University is the only institution in Hong Kong SAR providing formal education and training of optometrists since the early 80's. Each year, about 30 new optometrists graduate from the PolyU with a Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Optometry. This programme (4-year full time) aims to prepare students to be theoretically sound and professionally competent optometrists who are able to provide full-scope optometric care to the people of Hong Kong. The programme comprises four main areas of study, namely basic sciences, optometric sciences, clinical sciences, and clinical & professional training.(3)
- D. Up till now, about 450 formally educated optometrists are practicing in private practices and hospitals in Hong Kong.

Nothing new

- A. In 1989, the Society made a submission to the Working Group on Primary Care (Appendix 1). In 1991, the Working Group released its report and the Society responded to its findings (Appendix 2). The Society found that the majority of the recommendations of the Working Party relating to health care delivery involve improvements and reorganization of the delivery of primary **MEDICAL** care services rather than primary **HEALTH** care in its fuller sense.(4)
- B. That was 10 years ago. Today, we find that the contents of our 1989 submission and 1991 reply are as relevant as they were 10 years ago. In the intervening 10 years, vision and eye care have moved on in other countries. Optometry has become more integrated into the health care system of many industrialized countries. Here in the Hong Kong SAR, we have stood still. The losers are ordinary Hong Kong citizens.

The root of the problem

- A. This Society believes that the root of the problem with our current health care system lies in part to the exclusion of non-medical health care professions in decision making processes and the benign complicity of the government in allowing the medical profession to dominate over all health care issues in the Hong Kong SAR.
- B. These factors have ensured that non-medical health care professionals would never be free to practice to the full scope of their training and ability. It is unfortunate that the government has not had the foresight to recognize the potential for a conflict of interest when the medical profession is allowed to have extensive influence and control over other health care professions.

Why is Optometry's regulatory body, the Optometrists Board, chaired by a physician?

An example of the dominance of the medical profession over other health care professions is the membership composition of the regulatory bodies for these other professions. In the case of the Optometrist Board, the chairman has always been a medical person. Ophthalmologists are also appointed to this Board, again ignoring the potential for conflict of interest.

- Why is it necessary to have eye surgeons in an Optometrists Board?
- Why does the regulatory body for physicians not have representatives from other health care professions?
- Why is there no representative from the professional bodies, like the HKSPO, in the Optometrists Board?
- Why is there lack of transparency on appointing Board members?

Moreover, the Society also regrets that ophthalmologic center of public hospitals, e.g. Hong Kong Eye Hospital, do not accept the direct referral of patients from optometrists now. It simply means they are ignoring the role of optometrists on primary visual health care.

The way forward

- A. The Society regrets that the Harvard report, whilst acknowledging that the health care system is medically driven, then proceeded to look for solutions through administrative measures. The opportunity to mobilize non-medical health care professions to participate in providing a solution was not explored.
- B. Nevertheless, the Society hopes that this panel will take the broader view in making its recommendation. Optometrists, physiotherapists, nurses, dentists and pharmacists are all educated in local universities funded by the UGC. They receive education and training on par with other industrialized countries. It would be ironic if our government trains its professionals to a high level on the one hand and then restricts the job scope of these professionals to narrow low level tasks on the other hand
- C. The role of optometrists in the planning and implementation of local primary health care system should not be ignored by the Government of Hong Kong SAR.
- D. **“Hong Kong without a coherent overall policy for financing or organizing health care.”** (5) If Government can make good use of such large groups of health care practitioners, e.g. optometrists, in the role of prevention, promotion and maintenance of health care in the increasing elderly population, this can definitely improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of health care.

REFERENCES:

- (1) <http://www.opt.pacificu.edu/opt/define.html/>, American Optometric Association, August 1997.
- (2) <http://www.opto.ca>, The Canadian Association of Optometrists,
- (3) Prospectuses for Undergraduate Studies, Dept of Optometry and Radiography, by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 1999, pp214
- (4) A submission to the Working Group on Primary Health Care, HKSPO, 1989,pp.2
- (5) Executive Summary of Harvard Team Report, pp.8