

5 January 2000

The Hon. Michael Ho
Chairman
LegCo Panel on Health Services
Legislative Council Secretariat
Legislative Council Building,
Jackson Road,
Central,
Hong Kong

Dear sir,

The Role Of Optometrists in Hong Kong's Health Care System

The Hong Kong College of Family Physicians respectfully submits the following comments with regard to the role of optometrists in the provision of primary eye care.

Primary care should be delivered by doctors with training in holistic care. The development of Family Medicine will ensure quality primary care. Family Physicians listen and understand patients, treat them as a person and provide comprehensive, continuous and holistic care to them and their families. Emphasis is on the development of good doctor-patient relationship, continuity of care, prevention, education and counseling to help patients manage their health problems. If primary health care is effective, fewer people will be ill through adequate prevention, less ill people will need expensive hospitalization through early diagnosis and appropriate management, and patients can be discharged earlier from hospitals or specialist clinics because they can be properly followed up and monitored continuously by competent primary care doctors in the community. In countries where quality primary care is provided by competent doctors, there are lower cost of care, better levels of health, less use of medications and higher satisfaction rating for healthcare services provided.

Whereas there is recognition of the importance of developing family medicine in Hong Kong, the suggestion of optometrists to provide primary eye care is seen as a step backwards in the reform and improvement of healthcare in Hong Kong. Optometrists cannot provide primary care because they are not trained to provide holistic care and perform opportunistic health screening. We cannot envisage optometrists calculating Body Mass Indices, measuring blood pressure and

checking on smoking and drinking habits of their customers who came for refractory complaints. Optometrists can probably detect diabetes when there are eye complications but the family physician endeavors to screen for diabetes in the early asymptomatic stage. We are particularly concerned with the organ specific approach to health when eye symptoms are often manifestations of systemic diseases. Over and over again, the holistic approach to patients is emphasized in the practice of family medicine.

Public resource is precious especially with the recent question of the sustainability of financing the present healthcare system in Hong Kong. There is consensus amongst economists as well as health care administrators that Family Physicians can provide an effective gate-keeping role by controlling the referral to secondary and tertiary care and thereby increase the cost-effectiveness of the healthcare system in Hong Kong. Family physicians are in the best position to initiate appropriate treatment to eye problems and refer the patients to specialists and allied health professionals including optometrists for specialized care as and when needed. Direct referral by optometrists to eye specialists will destroy the gate-keeping role, which nowadays is considered to be the most important step in the control of use of the health care dollars. After initiating appropriate treatment and assessment of the index of severity of acute problems, the Family Physician can decide whether immediate referral should be made to the A&E Dept or whether the patient could be referred to the Specialist Out Patient Clinics. Many minor eye problems such as simple conjunctivitis are presently treated by Family Physicians. When dealing with eye problems that have significant familial traits, Family Physicians will initiate screening of the other family members. Systemic diseases, presenting as an eye symptom may involve imminent serious complications of other end organs such as the heart. These can be readily identified by doctors rather than optometrists and promptly managed accordingly. Likewise, optometrists may lack the necessary knowledge of pharmacology to deal with drug interactions if they were to provide primary eye care, which may involve prescribing medication. To assure the quality of care delivered to the public, it is obvious that medical practitioners are the more appropriate providers of primary care.

I sincerely hope members of the Health Panel will take the above comments into consideration in determining the role of optometrist in the healthcare system of Hong Kong. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I could provide further information.

Yours truly,

Dr. Donald K.T. Li
President
The Hong Kong College of Family Physicians