Appendix I

Bills Committee on
Occupational Deafness (Compensation)(Amendment) Bill 2002

The Administration's Response -

Prices of hearing assistive devices recommended by audiologists

Introduction

This paper provides information requested by members of the Bills Committee at the meetings held on 23 December 2002 and 20 January 2003 on the following aspect –

Prices of hearing assistive devices recommended by audiologists.

Purpose of the proposal on reimbursement of expenses in relation to hearing assistive devices

2. Considering that deafness at a certain level would hamper a claimant's ability to communicate with other people and thus affect his earning capacity, we propose to provide reimbursement of expenses incurred in purchasing, repairing and replacing hearing assistive devices to claimants who were successful in obtaining compensation for permanent incapacity under the Occupational Deafness (Compensation) Ordinance to help them get over their hearing impairment.

Common types of hearing assistive devices and their prices

3. According to audiologists, the most common type of hearing assistive devices that can assist a person in communicating with other people is hearing aid. Besides, telephone amplifier specially designed for use by persons with hearing difficulty and desktop telephone with flashing light or other visual device to indicate ringing are also common instruments in enabling persons with hearing difficulty to keep in contact with people beyond their domicile.

(A) Hearing aid

4. We have conducted a detailed study on the types of hearing aids and the factors affecting the prices of hearing aids. There are basically 4 types of hearing aids. They are the Body-worn (i.e. can be put inside the pocket), Behind-the-ear, In-the-ear and In-the-canal types. While digital models are available for the Behind-the-ear, In-the-ear and In-the-canal types of hearing aids, analog (i.e. conventional) models are available for all the four types of hearing aids.

5. According to professional advice, the prices of hearing aids are usually linked with 3 factors. They are –

(i) the technology involved in the design of the hearing aid;

(ii) the size of the hearing aid; and

(iii) the degree of hearing loss of the user.

6. Firstly, digital hearing aids are generally more expensive than the analog ones. Among the 3 types of hearing aids mentioned in paragraph 4 above for which digital models are available, the In-the-ear and In-the-canal hearing aids are more expensive than the Behind-the-ear ones because the former two types have to be tailor-made for individual user for the purpose of fitting respectively inside the external ear and the ear canal. Secondly, regarding the size of hearing aids, the general principle is the smaller the hearing aid, the more expensive it is. Thirdly, hearing aids catering for severe hearing loss are more expensive than those catering for mild hearing loss.

7. Our research reveals that the price of analog Body-worn hearing aids ranges from around HK$600 to about HK$2,300, whereas that for analog Behind-the-ear hearing aids ranges from around HK$1,000 to about HK$3,800. For In-the-ear and In-the-canal types of analog hearing aids, their prices are between around HK$2,500 and about HK$3,100. Behind-the-ear digital hearing aids cost from around HK$2,600 to about HK$9,000, while In-the-ear and In-the-canal types of digital hearing aids cost around HK$4,800 to about HK$12,900. We obtain information on the prices from the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf and specialist retail suppliers.

8. In response to the view expressed by Dr YU Tak-sun in the second meeting of the Bills Committee on 20 January 2003 that it would be better for persons with sensorineural hearing loss to use digital hearing aids, we have consulted professional advice and gathered that there is hitherto no evidence showing whether analog or digital hearing aids are more suitable for sensorineural deafness sufferers.

9. Furthermore, we have consulted expertise in the audiological field on the comparative performance of analog and digital hearing aids in suppressing frivolous noise. We are advised that both the analog and the digital types of hearing aids can help people with hearing impairment to perceive noise by magnifying the incoming sound. Both types of hearing aids have built-in mechanism to reduce frivolous noise, only that the methods used are different.

10. Digital hearing aids can suppress noise in many ways through computer programming while the analog types employ electronic noise reduction mechanism to achieve the purpose of filtering frivolous noise. As the two types of hearing aids use different means to reduce frivolous noise, it is difficult to tell which one excels the other. Besides, the sound transmitted through hearing aids will be distorted if the sensorineural cells have suffered severe impairment, and deaf persons experiencing psycho-acoustic problems usually have difficulties in differentiating the frequency of the incoming sound. Under such circumstances, users of whatever types of hearing aids may still be unable to appreciate whether frivolous noise has been effectively filtered away.

11. Although digital hearing aids are equipped with a variety of frequency adjustment capabilities and feedback reduction mechanism, there is up to the present no scientific proof pointing to whether digital hearing aids are better than the analog ones.

12. Our attention is specially drawn by audiologists to the fact that the choice of high quality hearing aids should not be judged by their price. That is, hearing aids may not be better merely because they are more expensive. What is more important is the suitability and receptivity of individual users in using specific types and models of hearing aids. For example, it might not be appropriate to prescribe a digital In-the-ear or In-the-canal hearing aid to elderly users as they might find it difficult to adjust the control buttons of the hearing aids, bearing in mind that the dexterity of fingers of a person will usually

deteriorate with age. The choice of a suitable hearing aid among various models should be vested with specialists who would prescribe an appropriate hearing aid to clients on the basis of their professional judgment with due consideration to the special circumstances of the user.

13. For Members' reference, according to the guidelines issued by the Hospital Authority to relevant medical professionals, in submitting applications for funding support for hearing assistive devices for their clients, the hearing assistive devices so recommended should be of the most commonly used and reasonably priced when compared with items with similar features and quality which are essential according to the client's condition. On their recommended list of hearing assistive devices, the predominant price range falls between HK$1,800 to HK$3,000.

(B) Other hearing assistive devices

14. We have gathered from the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf and specialist retail outlets that the price of telephone amplifier specially designed for use by persons with hearing difficulty is around HK$200 to HK$360, while the installation of flashing light device on a regular telephone costs less than HK$100. Desktop telephone with flashing light or other visual device to indicate ringing together with built-in amplifier and inductive coil costs around HK$800.

Proposed ceiling of reimbursement

15. The Working Group of 1996 recommended a new compensation item of providing hearing assistive devices by way of reimbursement to claimants who have obtained compensation for permanent loss of earning capacity to help them overcome their hearing problems. Upon consideration of the need of deaf persons and administrative arrangement, that Working group recommended to provide HK$15,000 to applicants for the purchase and maintenance of hearing assistive devices and for expenses on related services. The Working Group which started to conduct a review on the Occupational Deafness Compensation Scheme in December 2000 learnt that the cumulative inflation rate between the last review and 2001 was very mild. After considering the

market price of hearing assistive advices, the Working Group of 2000 recommended to maintain the reimbursable ceiling at HK$15,000.

16. In response to Hon Audrey EU's question raised in the second meeting of the Bills Committee held on 20 January 2003 regarding the room for a reduction in the prices of hearing assistive devices, we have learnt from enquiries made with the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf and specialist retail outlets that due to the effect of deflation in recent years, the price of hearing assistive devices has edged down by about 3% to 5% in the past two years. The drop in prices of digital hearing aids is more significant than that for analog hearing aids.

17. To ensure the proper use of resources, we propose that the hearing aids must be purchased on the recommendation of qualified professionals in order to make sure that the applicant will benefit from the appropriate device that suits his need. On the basis of the advice of audiologists and otorhinolaryngologist and detailed consideration of the prices of hearing assistance devices, we propose to set the reimbursement ceiling for the initial purchase of hearing assistive devices at HK$6,000 and the overall ceiling per applicant at HK$15,000. Apart from the reimbursement ceiling for the initial purchase and the overall ceiling, there is no restriction on the amount of reimbursement to the applicant in each year.

Labour Department
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