

# 立法會 *Legislative Council*

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## **Paper for the House Committee meeting on 30 May 2003**

### **Report of the Panel on Health Services on its proposal for a select committee to be appointed to inquire into the handling of the SARS outbreak**

#### **Purpose**

This paper reports on the proposal of the Panel on Health Services that the Legislative Council (LegCo) should appoint a select committee to inquire into the handling of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak by the Government and the Hospital Authority (HA), and to conduct a comprehensive review of the whole process.

#### **Background**

2. The outbreak of SARS in early March 2003 has brought about serious impacts on the local community and has dealt a heavy blow to the local economy. As at 28 May 2003, there were 1 730 cases of SARS infection and 270 deaths. Out of the 1 730 cases, 381 involved health care workers or medical students. As a result, hospital services have been seriously strained causing the need to temporarily suspend certain services.

#### **Deliberations of the Panel**

##### Areas of major concern

3. The Panel has been holding weekly special meetings to monitor the Administration's work in the handling of the SARS outbreak. Some of the issues raised by Members at these meetings are discussed in paragraphs 4 to 10 below.

4. Members have questioned whether the hospital cluster arrangement is working effectively in dealing with the outbreak, and whether it has created difficulties in staff deployment between the hospital clusters to deal with sudden upsurge in workload in some hospitals. Questions have also arisen as to whether

there is fair division of work among public hospitals as some hospitals are overloaded with SARS cases while others only have to deal with a small number of such cases.

5. Members have also expressed concern about the problem of lack of isolation facilities and suitable ventilation design for control of infectious diseases at hospitals which makes it difficult to effectively prevent cross-infection of other patients and infection of health care workers.

6. Members are most concerned about the continued infection of health care workers amidst constant complaints of insufficient protective gear, in particular N95 face masks, from the frontline health care workers. Members have urged the HA management, in particular the middle management at the hospital level, to show more understanding of frontline staff's psychological need and to provide them with the type of gear which would help them feel assured of being sufficiently protected. Members have also asked the Administration whether the frontline workers are given sufficient rest to recover from the heavy pressure of work which would in turn help to reduce the likelihood of infection.

7. Members are also concerned whether there is sufficient close consultation, coordination and cooperation between the Government, HA and the medical faculties of the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong in dealing with the various key areas of work to control the outbreak.

8. Some Members are of the view that the various control measures, such as home confinement of household contacts of confirmed SARS patients and health checks at border control points, have not been implemented as speedily as possible.

9. Some Members consider that in the handling of the SARS outbreak at Amoy Gardens, the Isolation Order was not issued fast enough to prevent a large number of residents of Block E from moving out before the Order took effect and thereby spreading the SARS virus to other districts.

10. From the outset, Members have been very concerned about the need for an effective mechanism for notification of infectious diseases between Hong Kong and Guangdong Province, given the large number of people crossing the border daily. Members have noted the information on the notification mechanism provided by the Administration after the first meeting of the Expert Group on Prevention and Treatment of Infectious Atypical Pneumonia in Guangzhou on 17 and 18 April 2003. Some Members consider that even with an enhanced notification mechanism in place, there is a need to ensure that there is prompt exchange of information on infectious diseases between Guangdong and Hong Kong.

### The motion

11. At the special meeting of the Panel on 14 May 2003, Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung tabled a motion proposing that a select committee be formed to review the handling of the SARS outbreak by the Government. Eight members of the Panel were present when the motion was put to vote. Six members voted in support of the motion and one member abstained. The wording of the motion passed by the Panel is as follows -

"That this Panel proposes that a select committee be set up by the Legislative Council to inquire into the handling of the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome by the Government and the Hospital Authority and to conduct a comprehensive review of the entire process."

### Views of members

12. In moving his motion, Hon Michael MAK Kwok-fung pointed out that at the start of the SARS outbreak, the Administration was unable to fully grasp the seriousness of the situation and failed to take timely measures to prevent the spread of the disease to the community. Even at the present time which was two months after the outbreak first started, he considered that some of the existing measures were still not entirely satisfactory.

13. Mr MAK was concerned whether the problems had been caused by shortcomings in existing policies or the Administration's decision making process. As it was possible that another outbreak could occur later in the year as predicted by a number of microbiologists and epidemiologists, he considered that a select committee should be appointed by LegCo to inquire into the handling of the outbreak so that lessons could be learnt from past mistakes, if any.

14. Hon Andrew CHENG Kar-foo opined that the Government was slow in reacting to the SARS crisis. He considered that LegCo had an important role to play in reviewing the handling of the outbreak and its work in this regard would not duplicate the inquiries to be conducted by the Government and HA. He also stressed the need for the select committee to be appointed as soon as possible, and for it to work through the summer recess with a view to completing its work before June 2004.

15. Hon Cyd HO Sau-lan shared Mr CHENG's view that even though both the Government and HA would conduct separate reviews of the handling of the SARS outbreak, LegCo should uphold its monitoring role by conducting an independent inquiry into the handling of the SARS outbreak. As the SARS outbreak was an entirely new phenomenon, Ms HO hoped that the LegCo select committee, if appointed, could cooperate with the other bodies set up to review the handling of the outbreak.

### **Recommendation of the Panel**

16. The Panel agreed that the proposal for a select committee to be appointed by LegCo to inquire into the handling of the SARS outbreak by the Government and HA should be put to the House Committee to seek its support.

### **Advice sought**

17. The House Committee is invited to note the recommendation of the Panel in paragraph 16 above.

Council Business Division 2  
Legislative Council Secretariat  
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