

**LegCo Panel on Health Services
Public Mortuary Services**

Purpose

This paper explains the operation of public mortuaries, the measures taken to alleviate the problem of insufficient refrigerating capacity, and other associated issues.

Background

2. Under Section 5 of the Coroners Ordinance (Cap 504), places can be designated as mortuaries for the reception of bodies for the purpose of autopsies⁽¹⁾.

3. At present, there are three public mortuaries operated by the Forensic Pathology Service of the Department of Health (DH). They are Victoria Public Mortuary (VPM) built in 1972, Kowloon Public Mortuary (KPM) built in 1976 and Fu Shan Public Mortuary (FSPM) built in 1989. Their capacities, at the time of their coming into operation, were 32, 44 and 128 respectively.

4. In 1998, additional cold chambers were installed to meet the growing demand for storage space, bringing the capacities of the three public mortuaries to 60, 72 and 168 respectively.

5. At the moment, bodies are kept in public mortuaries for an average of up to 17 days. And in May and June 2005, the number of bodies stored in VPM, KPM and FSPM ranged from 44 to 78, 108 to 148 and 118 to 143 respectively. The table below sets out the capacities and intakes of the three mortuaries :

	Built in	Original capacity	Expanded in	Capacity after expansion	Average No. of new cases handled daily	No. of bodies stored daily in May-June 2005
VPM	1972	32	1998	60	3.7	44-78
KPM	1976	44	1998	72	8	108-148
FSPM	1989	128	1998	168	6.7	118-143

⁽¹⁾ According to Cap. 504, deaths caused by an accident or violence, a crime or under suspicious circumstances, etc. would require an autopsy to be performed.

New Kwai Chung Public Mortuary (KCPM)

6. The construction of a new public mortuary in Kwai Chung, with a facility to keep 220 bodies, has been completed. This public mortuary is expected to be fully operational in September / October 2005.

Capacity and Operation

7. The above figures indicate that capacity problems occur in VPM and KPM. Apart from planning and developing the KCPM, the DH advises the next of kin of the deceased to claim the bodies as soon as possible, and implements overflow arrangements by transferring bodies to other public mortuaries where capacities are available.

8. The issue of capacity in public mortuaries and their operation have recently drawn the attention of the public. We take the matter very seriously and appreciate the feelings of the family members of the deceased. Capacity limitations notwithstanding, orderly and dignified handling of bodies remains DH's prime objective. To address the concerns, DH has taken the following immediate actions: –

- (a) Since 6 July, DH has opened the storage facilities at the KCPM upon confirmation that the refrigerating facilities are generally ready for operation;
 - (b) The management has reminded the medical staff who monitor the operation and management of the mortuary of the need to pay particular attention to any irregularities e.g. register book entry, the total number of bodies, their turnaround, the handling of bodies, disinfection work, security, body claiming procedures etc;
 - (c) The management has met with the staff working in the mortuaries to better understand their sentiments and operational difficulties, and exchange views on improvement measures. Staff of the mortuaries were once again reminded to handle the bodies with respect and to follow proper procedures; and
 - (d) Allegations on corruption have been investigated by ICAC, but no evidence of such has been identified. However, corruption prevention will continue to be an on-going exercise.
9. Recognizing that we cannot rely solely on the above immediate

measures to ensure smooth and quality services, an inter-departmental Committee met on 11 July under the steer of the Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food to look into public mortuary, cremation and other related services, with a view to examining the existing procedures, reviewing the capacities of the facilities and contingency arrangements, maximizing the use of existing facilities and examining the adequacy of future provisions. Members of the Committee include representatives from DH, Hospital Authority, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, Planning Department, Architectural Services Department and Home Affairs Department.

10. The agreed measures are set out in paragraphs 11-13 below.

Public mortuary services

11. In relation to public mortuary services,

- Operation guidelines for public mortuary staff have been refined to provide details in respect of proper handling of bodies. The need for orderly and dignified handling of bodies are re-emphasised. Additional notices, including corruption prevention notices, will also be displayed.
- The record system will be computerised to provide, amongst others, real time management data. Computerisation will be implemented in phases, with the system in KCPM to commence operation in September 2005 and FSPM in 2005-06.
- Consideration is being given to installing close-circuit TV in public mortuaries to ensure security and handling of bodies.
- There is a need to re-provision VPM which was first built in 1972 and has already reached its full capacity in terms of present space site utilisation. Initially, a possible site at Cape Collinson had been identified. The Administration would first examine the feasibility of the site in respect of traffic arrangements, geotechnical aspects, utility provisions, etc. The Eastern District Council would also be consulted on this initial proposal. Approval from the Town Planning Board to rezone the site for mortuary use would also be required.

Cremation capacity

12. FEHD has committed in its performance pledge that an applicant with a cremation permit could make a booking at any government crematorium within 15 calendar days from the day next to the date of application for the deceased person. However, sometimes bereaved applicants deliberately choose not to cremate the bodies within the 15-days period due to various reasons, particularly their preference for auspicious dates/weekends. FEHD has along been meeting this pledge and will continue to flexibly adjust the hours of operations of the crematoria to cope with public demand as and where necessary.

- Currently, there are 32 cremators in six government-managed crematoria with a total capacity of 34,400 cremation sessions a year⁽²⁾. Upon commissioning in 2006 of the six re-provisioned cremators now under construction at Diamond Hill Crematorium, the annual cremation capacity will increase by 16% to 40,000 sessions.
- Plans are in hand to re-provision existing cremators at Wo Hop Shek and Cape Collinson Crematoria to further increase the cremation capacity. Subject to technical feasibility studies, consultation with District Councils and LegCo Panel, and funding approval from the Finance Committee, FEHD's preliminary estimate is that the annual cremation capacity will be increased by around 50% to 52,700 sessions by 2014 upon completion of these two proposed projects.

Provision of niches

13. In relation to niches, FEHD manages a total of 138 000 niches in six columbaria sites.

- Construction work is being undertaken to provide 9,700 new niches in columbaria at Cape Collinson, Kwai Chung and Wo Hop Shek for commissioning in the first half of 2006 by phases, with an addition of another 1,000 niches in Cheung Chau Columbarium by end-2006. Subject to funding approval from the Finance Committee in 2006, FEHD aims to provide 18,500 new niches at Diamond Hill Columbarium for commissioning in 2008.

⁽²⁾ The number of registered deaths in 2004 was 37,322. In 2004, 84% of the bodies are cremated.

- Other longer-term plans of providing more niches in existing columbaria at Wo Hop Shek, Kwai Chung, and Fu Shan are being contemplated. Subject to detailed studies, consultation with relevant District Councils and the LegCo Panel, and funding approval, a preliminary estimate of more than 80,000 new niches will be made available in the longer term. The above plans are expected to increase the total number of niches managed by FEHD by more than 110,000 (or 80%) within the next decade.
 - Apart from niches, there are eight Gardens of Remembrance (GOR) in existing columbaria. Relatives of the deceased may spread the deceased ashes in these GOR. However, the usage rate of these GOR is very low at present. To encourage more active use of these GOR in a bid to relieve the demand pressure on niches, a pilot project will be conducted at the Cape Collinson GOR to beautify the landscaping features and to erect a wall for mounting plaque in memory of the deceased.
14. The Committee will meet again in the third quarter of this year to review progress of the above measures.
15. Members are invited to note the content of this paper.

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