

For discussion on
10 April 2006

Legislative Council Panel on Health Services

Work Pressure of Health Care Practitioners in the Hospital Authority

PURPOSE

This paper sets out the present situation of the work pressure faced by health care practitioners in the Hospital Authority (HA) and the measures taken by the HA to address the issue.

WORK PRESSURE OF HEALTH CARE PRACTITIONERS IN THE HA

2. Work and time pressure today is a key challenge for most professions and organizations. The HA, being the second largest employer in Hong Kong, is no exception. Over 26,000 health care practitioners are currently working in the HA, in an industry involving close and intense interaction with patients seeking treatment, a high degree of division of work and specialization which in itself gives rise to a potentially stressful environment.

Health Care Service Is Stressful By Nature

3. The work nature of health care professionals is inherently stressful. A vast majority of the health care practitioners have to deal with life and death situations which require timely and precise decisions. Particular to the public health care service, 24 hour round-the-clock and emergency services have to be provided, hence the need for work shifts, irregular working hours and for doctors to be on-call to attend to unpredictable changes in patient conditions. In addition, the HA, being the public health care organization, is the first point of contact in handling emergencies due to natural disasters, infectious disease outbreaks and social disruptions etc. All these complex challenges exert tremendous pressure on the health care practitioners working in the HA.

Increasing Demand of Public Health Care Services

4. The HA's success in delivering high quality of patient care has been well recognized. Coupled with the fact that its services are heavily subsidized, demand for the HA's services is increasing which has put pressure

on both its staff workload and financial resources. It is anticipated that the growth in demand would continue with the rapidly growing and ageing population; advancement in medical technology leading to increasing number of treatable conditions; tendency of early occurrence of chronic illnesses in the population; and over reliance of the general public on the public health care system.

Professional Training and Career Opportunities

5. As with other professions, the health care practitioners have to undergo continuous professional education and training to meet professional requirements and keep up with new knowledge and skills. Furthermore, as in the case of many other organizations, the general challenging economic environment in Hong Kong in the past few years brought along concerns amongst the HA staff about job security as well as advancement and training opportunities.

MEASURES TAKEN BY THE HA IN ADDRESSING WORK PRSSURE

6. The HA prides itself as a caring employer, staff are the backbone of the HA's service and inculcating a 'people first' and 'care for the carers' culture remains a priority of the organisation. We recognise that although work pressure cannot always be eliminated, stress factors may be reduced. In this connection, the HA has been closely monitoring, through various channels, the work pressure of its health care practitioners with a view to working out appropriate pro-active measures by both the management and staff to tackle the challenges and maintain a high quality of service provision to members of the public. The relevant measures recently taken by the HA are set out below.

Workload Relief

7. One of the measures to reduce work pressure is to manage the workload of healthcare practitioners. This can be achieved through, for example, strengthening manpower, rationalization of work arrangements, and improving work conditions and support. In relation to manpower, in the light of growing service demand, the HA's workforce of health care practitioners has been enhanced over the years despite budgetary constraints. In 2006/07, the HA has a vigorous recruitment plan :

- (a) Doctors – targeted to recruit 320 in total, 20 more doctors on top of the planned intake of 300 new residents each year;

- (b) Nurses – targeted to recruit 550 new graduates in total, as compare with 470 in 2005/06; and
- (c) Allied health professionals – targeted at 127 in total, 27 more staff in addition to the 100 planned intake.

8. Apart from strengthening manpower, the HA has implemented/will be implementing the following measures to provide relief to its staff :

- (a) Many doctors traditionally work long hours. However, in the past few years, the HA has, through the deployment of additional staff and rationalization of work arrangements, improved the working conditions of doctors. As a result, the working hours of most doctors, depending on the specialities, has decreased by 2.2% to 23.2% in 2005 as compare with their work hours in 2000. The frequency of on-call duties for doctors in the majority of specialties has also been reduced from once every 4 to 5 days in 2000 to once every 4 to 7 or 8 days in 2005. While the work-hour situation for doctors has been much improved, the HA has initiated a three-year plan to bring down the work hours of doctors to no more than 65 hours per week.
- (b) By comparison, the nursing and allied health grade staff have more stable work hours. That said, the HA has been strengthening its supporting staff who help relieve nurses from simple patient care duties. In addition, there is an increased use of voluntary continuous night shift arrangements for nurses to reduce night shift frequencies of others in the unit.

Structured Training to Enhance Professional Competence and Career Development

9. The HA has all along attached great importance to professional competence and training. The Institute of Health Care (IHC) under the HA offers a wide variety of continuing training and education programmes for the HA's health care practitioners, ranging from general programmes on Management and Personal Skills Development, Infectious Disease and Infection Control to specialized programmes catered for the needs of different professional staff. For example, the Institute of Advanced Nursing Studies under the IHC has developed specialty nursing certificate courses, enhancement programmes, and e-Learning Programmes to facilitate ongoing learning and personal development of nursing professionals in the HA. Plans are also in

hand to establish an Allied Health Training School under the IHC to provide structured training programmes for allied health professionals.

10. Training programmes for doctors are also structured with a view to fulfilling requirements set by the specialty colleges under the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine. Programme directors have been appointed in each specialty training programme to offer career advice to trainees and receive feedback on the training programmes. A nine-year specialist training program has been formulated to enhance further pre-specialist and post-specialist training for doctors.

11. In 2006/07, the HA has been granted a total of \$25 million recurrent new funding to enhance the overall training opportunities of health care practitioners. With the frontline staff participation, three working groups have been established by the HA to review the long term professional development strategy for all the three professional grades.

Enhancing Communication and Increasing Staff Engagement

12. Effective communication with staff will not only improve efficiency but will also help reduce pressure arising from miscommunication. In this regard, the HA has taken proactive measures to enhance two-way communication between the management and staff and to build mutual understanding and trust. Apart from visits of the HA Board members and senior executives who would be able to meet and listen to the views and needs of the staff direct, staff could also express their views, concerns and anxieties through new channels introduced in recent years such as the Staff Communication Ambassadors, staff hotlines and staff electronic letter box. The Bright Suggestion Scheme has also been launched to invite staff to contribute constructive ideas to improve the current workflow and to reduce workload.

Enhanced Pay Packages

13. On top of measures taken to relieve pressure faced by the health care professionals, the HA considers positive rewards important. To recognise good performance and retain high calibre staff, the HA is introducing enhanced remuneration measures covering doctors, nurses and allied health professionals under contract employment. Decision has been made to reward good performing staff with salary increments so that the reward would more closely commensurate with staff's experience and performance.

Enhancing Job Security for Staff who are Employed on Temporary Terms

14. While there is a need for the HA to maintain flexibility in its employment policies, hence the need for employing staff on temporary terms; this notwithstanding, the HA attaches equal importance to these staff. The HA is fully aware that uncertain job prospects are not conducive to relieving work pressure. As such, the HA has made an effort so that staff on temporary terms working in the HA for one year or more with good performance are offered contract terms to enhance their job security. In addition, it is the HA's promulgated policy that line managers are required to discuss with contract staff about their contract renewal at least three months before their contract expiration. This reduces the uncertain sentiment amongst staff. Furthermore, to enhance certainty, the HA is currently exploring the option of offering longer employment terms to retain quality staff to serve in the public health care system.

Safe and Healthy Working Environment

15. While the above measures undertaken by the HA are intended to reduce the pressure faced by its staff, it is imperative that a healthy working environment and where necessary, suitable remedial treatment and support should be provided and made available first and foremost. The HA is committed to providing its staff with a safe and healthy working environment. Multi-disciplinary Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) committees and teams have been established at all HA clusters to review and improve, where necessary, its occupational safety and health situation in hospitals and clinics. In addition, the HA is piloting three Occupational Medicine teams to provide personalised, timely, quality multi-disciplinary clinical services and rehabilitation to staff in three clusters. As the HA staff have direct and frequent interaction with members of the public who may be emotionally unstable, hence the risk of exposing to workplace violence, the HA has launched a comprehensive campaign comprising awareness promotion, education and surveillance to better prepare its staff to manage workplace violence.

16. To enhance the psychological wellness of its health care practitioners, the HA has established the Oasis which is the Centre for Personal Growth and Crisis Intervention. The scope of services provided includes psychological assessment and treatment, crisis intervention, professional training, consultation services, personal development programmes etc. In addition, workshops, seminars and talks etc are organised to provide support to staff on work-related psychological matters, such as crisis management and interpersonal skills. A structured peer support system – Critical Incident

Support Team – has also been set up in different hospitals to provide timely crisis intervention services, through trained staff volunteers, to staff in need so as to mitigate the psychological impact of a crisis and build up a caring culture in the organization.

THE WAY FORWARD

17. Health care is a very labour and skill intensive service and health care practitioners are the most valuable assets. The HA, as a caring organization, will continue to monitor the pressure faced by its health care professionals and consider further measures to minimize the stress factors as and when necessary.

**Hospital Authority
Health, Welfare and Food Bureau
April 2006**