



5<sup>th</sup> July 2017

## Physio Action responses to “Strategic Review on Healthcare Manpower Planning and Professional Development Report”

### 1. Manpower Planning of Registered Physiotherapists

There is a serious underestimation of the projection of physiotherapy services using the current service model at Hospital Authority and non-government organizations. Although there is no published recommendation of daily patient load, the daily attendance of physiotherapy in Hospital Authority is more than a double of our overseas counterparts (E.g. Australia, Canada, Singapore and the United Kingdom).

There is no projection on the demand of physiotherapists by work setting (Hospital Authority or non-government organizations). Also there is no data on the number of physiotherapists working in private settings taking up outsourced services from non-government organizations.

Despite the government's vision to augment primary healthcare, homecare and community health services to Hong Kong's aging population, as well as to decrease the waiting time for outpatient physiotherapy services at Hospital Authority, the projection in the report did not reflect the increase of need due to aging population.

There is no recommended ratio between junior and senior clinicians in Hospital Authority and non-government organizations. It is commonly seen that junior therapists have to work independently in non-government organizations without any mentor support. Their scope of work includes screening and triage of clients with chronic diseases without the presence of experienced physiotherapists. Therefore we do not recommend fresh graduates to work at non-government organizations immediately after their graduation. This is also one of the reasons for low staff retention rates in such work settings.



The turnover rate of physiotherapy staff at Hospital Authority and non-government organizations is not reported. However, through observation, the turnover rate of physiotherapists in non-government organizations is much higher than that of Hospital Authority. Other than the lack of mentor support, limited career progression and unattractive salary package are the most commonly quoted reasons for clinicians leaving their roles in the community.

We have to reiterate that physiotherapy is a profession which welcomes competent overseas graduates to practice in Hong Kong. However, the number of returnees is not sufficient to fulfil the needs of public healthcare system in Hong Kong.

## **Recommendations:**

There should be a standardized maximum daily patient load for physiotherapists in outpatient settings at Hospital Authority to assure quality of services and avoid fatigue of healthcare professionals.

For the same reason, the manpower demand in various settings at non-government organizations (including residential and community services) should be standardized for accurate projection.

There is a strong need to project separately the physiotherapist demand and to record the turnover rates in Hospital Authority and non-government organizations. Among the demands in non-government organizations, more focuses should be put on specialty areas, such as elderly, rehabilitation, and paediatrics physiotherapy. Therefore, further professional development planning in such specialty areas should be implemented.

There is also a strong need for other key performance indicators (KPIs) to ensure service quality.

An in-depth investigation of turnover of physiotherapists in various work settings,



whether the reason being lack of mentoring from senior clinical staff, or lack of career progression pathway or any others, should be done as soon as possible in order to improve staff retention. Clear career pathways and salary packages equivalent to colleagues at Hospital Authority should be established to encourage therapists to work in community settings.

We encourage the government to reinforce the promotion of qualified overseas physiotherapy graduates practicing in Hong Kong.

## 2. Professional Development

World Confederation of Physical Therapy (WCPT) demands their membership regions to nurture physiotherapists through a university-level entry program. However, the rumored new physiotherapy program to meet the increased physiotherapist demand is a self-financed program run by a post-secondary college. This is a backward move towards physiotherapy education, especially when the world's trend of physiotherapy education is progressing to higher academic credentials at masters or even doctorate level, such as that in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Taiwan.

The government has conveyed a wrong message to the public that they have increased the number of intakes of physiotherapy students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In fact, there was an increase of intake of physiotherapy students in 2001 to 150 per cohort. However when this cohort of graduates joined the workforce, the number of job vacancies was slashed down due to unforeseen economic circumstance and sudden change of recruitment funding from Hospital Authority. Thus, a huge proportion of new graduates were unable to practice as clinicians. The University Grants Committee (UGC) then decreased the number of students admitted to 60 in the 2004 cohort. The government should have been able to foresee a shortage of manpower because of such changes over the years.

We are strongly against the introduction of self-financed physiotherapy program as this demonstrates the government's lack of commitment to increase intake



in UGC funded programs in order to serve the society's demand in public health. The past experience of Master in Physiotherapy (entry level) program was blister in nature, which could be closed at any academic year when Social Welfare Department ceases the funding to graduates to work in non-government organizations. This is not a sustainable approach to meet the demand of physiotherapy service in Hong Kong. The Designated Study Subsidy Scheme Professions / Sectors for (SSSDP) may be a feasible funding scheme for self-financed program, but we welcome a mid/long term solution for nurturing future physiotherapists more.

Currently there is no public access to the accreditation criteria of new physiotherapy education programs from Physiotherapists Board. There is always a risk for first cohort graduates of new programs unable to attain registration. This will cause a huge disappointment to graduates and sponsors after spending a substantial amount of money on self-financed programs, when the school fee has to cover the cost of running anatomy and practicum laboratory, as well as paying teaching faculty and clinical educators. We cannot agree with any compromise of education quality for boosting the intake by approving sub-standard education program, thereby penalizing the public access to professional physiotherapy services.

### **Recommendations:**

Like medical doctors, the increased intake of physiotherapy education should be a UGC funded program in a university to comply with the standards of World Confederation of Physical Therapy, as well as a gesture of the government's commitment to improve the quantity and quality of physiotherapy services. Entry level physiotherapy education should also be gradually upgraded to masters and to doctorate level in accordance with international physiotherapy educational standard.

If a new education program is introduced, Physiotherapists Board should release the accreditation criteria which are publicly accessible and inform the public and



employers timely whether the graduates would be eligible to register in Hong Kong.

### 3. Professional Regulations

The Physiotherapists Board is currently chaired by a medical doctor, who is not an accredited physiotherapist, and the members are all appointed by the government. This does not align with modern healthcare services. Modern healthcare services should not be centered on medical doctors but an ecosystem where different healthcare professionals collaborate.

A medical doctor is not the most ideal person to chair the Board when he/she may not be aware of the professionalism related specifically to the field of physiotherapy. For example, he/she did not undergo entry level physiotherapy training, but he/she has the right to approve/reject education programs accreditation.

Over the years of evolvement of physiotherapy in Hong Kong, we are a group of tertiary educated healthcare professionals who are more than capable of demonstrating professional autonomy.

#### Recommendations:

Physiotherapists Board should be a standalone regulatory body and chaired by registered physiotherapist, while continuing to have an array of input from different stakeholders to drive the profession forward. The Board should also include representatives elected within the profession and patient groups.

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