

**For discussion
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Panel on Health Services

**Subcommittee on Issues Relating
to the Development of Chinese Medicine**

**Anti-epidemic efforts and roles that may be performed by
Chinese medicine practitioners
in the handling of the COVID-19 epidemic**

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the Government's efforts in facilitating the anti-epidemic role of Chinese medicine (CM) in our fight against Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Latest Situation

2. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared on 30 January 2020 that the COVID-19 constituted a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. On 11 March 2020, the WHO made the assessment that COVID-19 can be characterised as a pandemic.

3. The Government raised the response level under the Preparedness and Response Plan for Novel Infectious Disease of Public Health Significance to the Emergency Level on 25 January 2020. A “containment” strategy and a series of specific measures have been adopted by the HKSAR Government to achieve “early identification, early isolation and early treatment of the infected”, with a view to effectively preventing the spreading of the disease in Hong Kong through isolation, quarantine and sanitisation. These measures have been proven effective in curbing local transmission since the outbreak began and Hong Kong, at present, can still continue the “containment” strategy for epidemic control.

Communication with the CM Sector and Work Done

4. As part of the healthcare system in Hong Kong, Chinese medicine (CM), in partnership with other healthcare professions, would jointly participate in the work on the prevention and control of

COVID-19. In this regard, the Department of Health (DH) has been in liaison with Chinese medicine practitioners (CMPs), CMP associations, the Schools of CM of three local universities and CM clinics operated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The DH issued letters to local CMPs on multiple occasions in the past in light of the latest situation to provide the latter with updates on the epidemic, including how suspected cases are defined and to be handled as proposed by the Centre for Health Protection (CHP).

5. To enhance the CMPs' understanding and participation in the disease prevention and control work, the CHP organised forums on COVID-19 on 16 January 2020 and 20 January 2020 and invited CMPs to attend. To further encourage the involvement of CMPs in the prevention and control of COVID-19, the CHP has also published and regularly updated the "Prevention of COVID-19 – Infection Control Measures for Chinese Medicine Clinics (Interim)" for the reference of CMPs. The DH has also requested CMPs and CM clinics to retain the respective medical history of patients and staff rosters to facilitate the CHP to conduct contact tracing for cases. The aforementioned letters to CMPs and the infection control measures for CM clinics are available on the CHP's COVID-19 Thematic Website (www.coronavirus.gov.hk/chi/index.html).

6. Besides, in mid-March, the National Administration of Traditional CM had presented the HKSAR Government with two proprietary CMs recommended in the "Diagnosis and Treatment Protocols for Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia", namely the "Lianhua Qingwen Jiaonang" and "Huoxiang Zhengqi Pian" to support the HKSAR Government's anti-epidemic work. The Government has already distributed the CM drugs to those who may need them through the CM industry to encourage the industry to participate in the anti-epidemic efforts and enable the CM drugs to reach those in need.

CM Clinics in the 18 Districts

7. According to the guideline under the Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance (Cap. 599), all confirmed patients should be sent to public hospitals with infection control and isolation facilities for isolation and provided with treatments according to established clinical procedures. In light of the rapidly changing development of the epidemic, the Task

Force on Clinical Management on Infection of the Hospital Authority (HA) has formulated treatment plans and relevant hospitals are working closely with the HA on contingency work. Engaging CMPs in in-patient treatment at this stage will require not only detailed discussions and co-ordination among CMPs and Western medical practitioners, but also an understanding of the interactions between CM and Western medicine and the safety of their integrated use. Under the existing arrangements, CMPs cannot provide related treatment services to patients in public hospitals. That said, although CMPs cannot be directly involved in clinical practice under the present setting, we will continue to explore the matter and make timely arrangements as necessary.

8. In order to explore ways to enhance the involvement of CMPs in the disease prevention and control work, the HA invited CM experts from the Schools of CM of three local universities to set up a CM expert group in early February. Together with the CM Chiefs of Services of the Chinese Medicine Clinics cum Training and Research Centres (CM Clinics) (known as the Chinese Medicine Centres for Training and Research before 1 March this year), which are operating on a tripartite collaboration model in the 18 districts, they have collected information and literature on COVID-19 published by Mainland experts for multiple rounds of discussion and given advice on CMPs' involvement. The expert group has formulated relevant prevention protocols with the use of CM and provided the same to the CM Clinics for clinical reference. The HA has been providing information on disease prevention and control to the 18 CM Clinics. The HA has also set up triage stations in the CM Clinics and these clinics have to observe the relevant policies and guidelines of the CHP of the DH to refer those patients who fall under the surveillance scope to the Accident and Emergency Department of the nearest public hospitals for appropriate examination and treatment. Since January, the HA has provided several relevant infection control training sessions to CMPs in the 18 CM Clinics, covering basic anti-epidemic measures in clinics and ways of handling suspected cases. Meanwhile, the HA launched new Government-subsidised CM services in the 18 CM Clinics since early March to provide appropriate CM services to the public.

9. We are aware that the CM sector would like to enhance the involvement and role of CMPs in the anti-epidemic work. Since the

beginning of the outbreak, the HA has taken an open attitude in combating COVID-19. In early February, the HA proactively contacted Mainland and local CM experts and set up the expert group to formulate preventive protocols within a short period of time. With full support and facilitation of the Food and Health Bureau and in consultation with the experts, the HA launched the Special Chinese Medicine Out-patient Programme (the Programme) in the CM Clinic on 24 April, to provide free CM out-patient rehabilitation service to discharged persons who have received COVID-19 treatment. The Programme will be implemented in phases with the first phase at the United Christian Nethersole Community Health Service – The Chinese University of Hong Kong Chinese Medicine Clinic cum Training and Research Centre (Tai Po District). Depending on the latest situation and relevant preparatory work, the Programme will be rolled out to other CM Clinics. The rehabilitation programme includes a maximum of 10 free CM general consultations within 6 months from the discharge date of the patients, with no more than 5 doses of CM drugs prescribed per visit according to their clinical needs (acupuncture, bone-setting (Tui-na) and other treatments are not included in this special rehabilitation programme). Patients will be given a letter with information and enrollment details of the Programme upon their discharge. Participation in the Programme is voluntary.

10. We understand that currently some NGOs are offering similar services to discharged COVID-19 patients. We encourage the CM sector to make reference to this experience in providing appropriate CM services with a view to contributing to our anti-epidemic efforts. The HA will continue to explore the anti-epidemic role of the 18 CM Clinics, such as the corresponding disease preventive measures, in order to give full play to the strengths of CM.

11. In order to raise public awareness of disease prevention, the HA has already uploaded related information, such as information on preventing and treating influenza with CM, on the HA CM KINetics website (cmk.ha.org.hk) and social media pages for the public's reference.

CM Development Fund

12. To enhance the role of the CM sector in our anti-epidemic efforts, particularly in relation to prevention and rehabilitation treatment,

and to raise the capability of CMPs in areas such as clinical work, disease prevention/control and infection control, the HKSAR Government has included “Novel Coronavirus Epidemic Related Projects” in the CM Development Fund (CMDF) as a priority area open for application from 27 February 2020 for the sector to undertake related training, research and promotion projects. Moreover, the CMDF also launched the “CM Clinic Improvement Funding Scheme” on 9 March 2020 to subsidise the CM sector to improve facilities in CM clinics. Those project relating to enhancement of infection control facilities will be given priority consideration to safeguard the health of staff and patients of CM clinics and to provide quality CM services to the public. Details of these projects are available on the CMDF’s website (www.CMDevFund.hk).

Next Step

13. We will continue to explore the possibility of enhancing CMPs’ participation in in-patient care and clinical treatment in combating the disease, in order to give full play to the strengths of CM in the anti-epidemic work. With the establishment of the CM Hospital (CMH), the role of CM in in-patient treatment will be greatly enhanced.

14. In the long run, CM will assume a more important role in Hong Kong’s healthcare system. We aim to further strengthen the training of CMPs through the CMDF, the 18 CM Clinics and the future network of the CMH, provide effective support to the industry, and enhance the capability of the industry in dealing with public health issues, in order to give full play to the strengths of CM.

Advice Sought

15. Members are invited to note the paper and provide comments.

Food and Health Bureau

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