Responses from
Internet Professional Association and eHealth Consortium
On
the Healthcare Reform Consultation Document

June, 2008

The Internet Professional Association (iProA) and the eHealth Consortium would like to express our comments towards the Healthcare Reform Consultation Document, issued by the Food and Health Bureau, HKSAR in March 2008, as follows:

General Comments

With the rapidly ageing population in Hong Kong and ever-increasing medical costs as well as public expectation for better quality of healthcare services, we believe that Hong Kong should not maintain the status quo of the existing system and there should be a comprehensive reform to tackle with the challenges faced by the healthcare system now and in the future. Therefore, we welcome the proposed Healthcare Reform initiative and believe that it is the right time to engage in a territorial-wide reform via public-private partnerships.

We support the approach taken by this Consultation document, which adopts an all-rounded perspective towards the Healthcare Reform. Nevertheless, most of the Hong Kong citizens are highly concerned about the proposed Healthcare Financing models. We believe that the crust of the citizens' concerns is whether the more they pay will mean an equivalent return, if not more than, from what they will get in the reformed healthcare system. Therefore, we find it imperative to impose complimentary measures to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our healthcare system. For that reason, we specifically stress that effective application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is the necessary step to address that need and it plays a critical role in improving the quality of our healthcare system.

Develop Electronic Health Record Sharing

We fully support the Bureau's recommendation in establishing a territory-wide electronic health record (eHR) system, to enable better access to patients' records with patients' consent. A great number of studies and experience from overseas and local institutions have confirmed the benefits of eHR in improving the quality and efficiency of healthcare. We believe that the establishment of territory-wide eHR system is a critical and imminent measure to enhance better healthcare services in Hong Kong, for the following reasons:

- A sharable eHR system across the territory would reduce the medical risks and improve the quality of care. It would help to ensure efficient and effective treatment are to be applied to patients in a timely manner, without the duplicated efforts of investigations and treatments.
- A territory-wide eHR system is an essential element to enable close collaborations among different healthcare institutions and it is a critical factor to promote effective public-private partnerships.
- The eHR system is a crucial element to support any Healthcare Financing Models. One of its most salient functions is its ability to provide important information for handling reimbursement. It is also a vital tool to enhance cost efficiency in healthcare services.
- It could produce timely information to support disease surveillance, medical researches as well as development of better preventive care services.
- It helps to empower the patients to choose the right medical services and can serve to promote higher participation of patients to maintain their physical well-being.

Given the overarching importance of the territory-wide eHR platform, we strongly recommend the Government to set it on high priority in the reform agenda, even if a majority of the society has not yet reached a consensus on other suggestions under the Healthcare Reform Consultation.

In that vein, the following factors should be thoroughly considered in the course of

implementing the territory-wide eHR platform:

- Enough funding should be assigned to ensure the system's robustness, both in terms of system performance and security. The architecture of the system should be free from data security leaks and different kinds of information security breaches while maintaining flexibility of access by different participating agents.

- In parallel to the technical design and set-up of the platform, sufficient resources should be allocated to increase awareness and capacity building among all levels of Healthcare practitioners, from professional healthcare providers, to service administrators and allied health workers, as well as the general public. Not only it would help to ensure effective use of the platform in the future, but also helps to ensure their buy-in to the system.

- The eHR platform should consider adapting related international standards in eHealth to ensure our system would be in line with the global standards and best practices.

Roles of ICT in Healthcare Reform

We envision that ICT plays a pivotal role in promoting Public-Private Partnership in healthcare. Not only that it is an enabler for the sharing of eHR in the territory, but it is also an effective tool to enhance collaboration among talents across public and private sectors. ICT also contributes to enhancing the quality of primary healthcare as digital media can serve as an effective channel to empower our citizens to be more knowledgeable in terms of prevention and health risks, allowing them to make informed decision to choose the right care for themselves.

To complement the various measures suggested in the Healthcare Reform Consultation Document, we suggest the following initiatives to be carried out:

- Engage the ICT sector to establish pilot projects to explore the applications of

ICT in facilitating Public-Private Partnership, as well as in enhancing Primary Care.

- Explore the possibility of establishment of community based patient portals, as a gateway to communicate healthcare related information to the citizens and empower their choices of healthcare services.

Healthcare Financing Arrangements

We stand neutral to the different financing options laid down in the Document. We believe that no matter which financing options to be chosen, the society expects the options will come along with improved efficiency in the use of resources. We therefore lay down the above-mentioned suggestions to call for better use of ICT to enhance the cost effectiveness and quality of care in healthcare services.

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