



## **Our Opinion on the Healthcare Reform Consultation**

### **Trust Our Fellow Hong Kong People**

The success of Hong Kong is the entrepreneurship of its people. History has witnessed they have the wit and ability to manage risk and crisis. Government mandatory intervention can in some cases shatter the harmony of society and break down the natural and spontaneous system deeply rooted in the local culture. The government-led Mandatory Provident Fund (MPF) is a bitter example of sheer failure. Inflation, management and administration fees have eroded the effectiveness and purchasing power of the fund. Hong Kong people are reluctant to accept a replication of the MPF nightmare with the launch of another mandatory contribution scheme.

### **No Dispute on the Importance and Value of Preventive Care**

Preventive healthcare should have significantly more focus than tertiary than medical care as it means dollar cost saving for the government and Hong Kong people. As the Healthcare Reform Document has quoted "Evidence also suggests that enhanced primary care can reduce the demand for expensive, specialist-led hospital care, thereby reducing healthcare cost and increasing efficiency of the healthcare system". Not only that, effective preventive care can promote the well being and productivity of the general public. Hence, it deserves in-depth discussion and investigation. Disappointingly, the Consultation Document has just spared a small portion to discuss it.

### **Narrow-minded Preventive Care Concept**

The new strategy of preventive care in the Consultation Document focuses mainly on the establishment of a family doctor register. The viability of the family doctor model as the main entity in health prevention is in serious doubt for its effectiveness. How many family doctors will be willing to spend 10 to 15 minutes just for counseling on health? Will there be sufficient family doctors to handle the increase in client base? What fee structure the client is willing to pay and the family doctor can accept? What is the motivation of the busy working class to go to see the family doctor when they have no disease symptom? Isn't the very essence of preventative healthcare that a person stays out of the doctor's office?

Because the Document has taken a presumptive view that western medicine is the key solution to preventive care, the breath and variety of preventive options are restricted by the conventional mindset. Obviously, it did not perform a comprehensive review of the current holistic system. For instance, the role of Chinese medicine in the preventive system is totally ignored and the role of pharmacists in providing health advice and health screening is excluded. It also neglected to consider the preventive value of popular Chinese traditional practices such as Chinese health enhancing food



(參茸補品), traditional Chinese soup (中式湯水), and Chinese cooling teas (涼茶), which have been proven effective in preserving health. Moreover, Tai Chi, Chi Kung, and Chinese martial arts and many other evidence-based practices can be effective tools for health protection. These activities may better help explain the longevity of Hong Kong people when compared to the Western world.

Health prevention should involve multi-disciplinary teamwork and rely on a host of healthcare professionals such as nurses, pharmacists, Chinese medicine doctors, physiotherapists, nutritionists, herbalists, personal trainers, chiropractors and even teachers in schools and human resource department in companies. They cannot be adequately addressed by the family doctor alone. Numerous studies and healthcare models have shown a multi-disciplinary approach is required for health prevention and this fact is widely accepted by a majority of healthcare consumers and professionals. Focusing on a narrow scope of preventative healthcare in a doctor's office borders on negligence in addressing issues properly. The Health Authorities should publicize, promote, and develop multi-discipline professional health teams, programs and businesses that focus on preventative health strategies.

### **Restrictions on Public Knowledge Hinder Self-care**

In the Consultation Document, promoting self-care is one of the main strategies for reducing healthcare costs. Self-care is an important concept for an aging society. To advance the process, people must have access to information that can enable them to make the right decision on purchasing the appropriate products or services in the marketplace for health maintenance. Unfortunately, the Hong Kong people have not had fair access to this information because of the "Undesirable Medical Advertisement Ordinance", which severely limits product/services' ability to tell consumers that it can prevent a disease. For example, a product containing calcium and vitamin D on its label cannot make claim of "reducing the chance of osteoporosis or for the prevention of osteoporosis." The Ordinance virtually deprives a consumer's right of knowledge and the right of choice. The literacy level of the Hong Kong people is considered generally high, but, their knowledge in health and diseases is not so. Most probable, this is an unfortunate consequence of this Ordinance. If self-care and disease prevention concepts are to be developed in Hong Kong, the government should reconstruct the Ordinance to keep up with the increasing health needs of the general public in order to reduce and slow down their demand for medical care.

### **The Western Experience in Health Supplement**

Since many industrialized countries share the same problem of aging population and escalating medical expenditures, preventive care has become one of the top priorities in their social and healthcare agendas. More than a decade ago, individual countries



began to develop the health supplement concept. In recent years, our neighbors, the ASEAN, Taiwan and China have already recognized and advanced the health supplement concept as an additional or complementary element to their existing healthcare system. Compared to these countries, Hong Kong is lagging behind in this area when it should be a leader.

### **Preventive Measures for Disease Prevention**

Chronic diseases can develop gradually and silently from a healthy stage to a full-blown disease over an extended period. During this latent period, one should take suitable measures to prevent the deterioration of one's health. Ideally, one can follow closely the recommendations advocated by the Department of Health, which include balanced diet and sufficient physical exercise. However, according to the survey data published by the Central Health Education Unit of Department of Health in July 2005, only 9 out of 171 participants in the 24 focus groups had achieved the Department's recommended level of consumption, at least 2 servings of fruits and 3 servings of vegetables per day. Secondary school students and the working adults are the groups that exhibited the lowest compliance in eating the recommended diet and getting sufficient exercise.

For the low compliance group, which probably comprises the majority population of the working class, health supplements will be an important adjunct in health prevention. Already, health supplements such as fish oil and Omega-3 products have research evidence suggesting they are effective in cardiovascular risk reduction and are routinely recommended by Western doctors as part of the daily diet for almost all adults. Indeed, the US National Institutes of Health has listed three conditions for which fish oil and other omega-3 sources are most highly recommended: hypertriglyceridemia, secondary cardiovascular disease prevention and high blood pressure. Therefore, health supplements will continue to play a critical role in health prevention and also need to be a significant area of focus in this millennium.

### **U.S. Dietary Supplements and Healthcare Costs**

How much can dietary supplements affect health care costs? In the U.S., the National Institute of Health (NIH) has awarded significant funds to research institutes on a regular basis to conduct scientific studies on health food ingredients. In 2002, the American Heart Association, using Federal survey data, estimated that 13 million of Americans suffer from Coronary Heart Disease (CHD). In view of the mounting costs in treating the disease, the USFDA recognized the efficacy of omega-3 fatty acids in dietary supplements for preventing CHD by issuing a qualified health claim. The Lewin Group in U.S. estimates potential five-year (2006-2010) savings in health care expenditure of US\$3.1 billion resulting from a reduction of CHD among the over age



65 population by daily intake of 1,800 mg of Omega-3. The Group also estimates five-year (2005-2009) net savings in hospital, nursing facilities, and physician expenditures of US\$13.9 billion resulting from a reduction in hip fractures among those over age 65, through daily intake of supplements of 1,200 mg Calcium with vitamin D.

The Centre for Food Safety in Hong Kong also concurs with the US data and has quoted some healthcare cost reduction examples in their web site. They state:

“Overseas experiences have shown that nutrition labeling can have positive impact on food consumption pattern, save healthcare costs and human lives. For example:-

- U.S. - the cost-benefit study commissioned by the Food and Drugs Agency estimated that the saving in health care cost associated with the reduction in risk of cancer and coronary heart disease ranged from US\$ 4400 million to 26000 million;
- In Canada - the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and Health Canada calculated that the reductions in the direct and indirect costs related to the reduced risks of cancer, diabetes, coronary heart disease and stroke would be about CAD 5 billion over 20 years;
- In Australia and New Zealand - the health care cost associated with high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, obesity and type 2 diabetes ranges between 32 million and 42 million each year. It is also estimated that 320 to 460 lives could be saved each year with the introduction of mandatory nutrition labeling.”

### **Conclusion**

For the sake of enhancing preventive healthcare quality and expanding the choice of preventive options, the government should recognize the important role of science-based health food supplements (dietary supplement/health supplement) in preventive care strategies and assist the development of health food supplement into self-care and self-financed preventive options. Ignoring the role of health food supplements in health prevention will have a direct negative impact on future healthcare costs and should not be overlooked in their importance for Hong Kong people.

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