



By email: beStrong@fhb.gov.hk

13 June 2008

Food and Health Bureau
19F Murray Building
Garden Road
Central, Hong Kong

Dear Sir:

The Institute for Health Policy and Systems Research (IHPSR) has been a keen observer of healthcare systems and has engaged itself in understanding and contributing to Hong Kong's healthcare reform development and debates. We wish to submit the following comments and views on the consultation document "Your Health Your Life":

(1) CONCERNS OF THE MIDDLE CLASS

The consultation document and materials have not provided a full discourse of the concerns and expectations of the middle class with respect to the healthcare system both now and in future. IHPSR offers the comments of members of the middle class in a recent public forum on "The Healthcare System that We Want" (the forum in its entirety was video-taped and is available for viewing at <http://www.ihpsr.org.hk/activities.htm>) as samples and suggests that FHB find out, give due consideration and fully address their needs and concerns in Hong Kong's future healthcare development.

In particular, there are strong worries that services of the future public healthcare system will not be accessible to them in both a timely and affordable manner, especially after retirement. There is also a deep concern about equity. They feel that, while they pay more taxes as compared to members of the vulnerable groups of society, the future healthcare system will not be targeting services to meet their needs. They seem to suggest that unless they are convinced that the future healthcare system will benefit all members of society equally and equitably, they will otherwise not be willing to support any healthcare financing scheme where they are required to contribute more money to the future system.

Hence, we urge that the government uphold Pareto optimality as the fundamental concept to use in evaluating reform strategies and designing a supplemental financing scheme for Hong Kong's future healthcare system.

(2) PRODUCTIVITY OF THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

To some observers, perverted incentives prevail in Hong Kong's existing healthcare system. As a result, the system is inefficient and costs are high. The system can be much more competitive and less wasteful. Anecdotal evidence suggests that both user satisfaction and provider morale in the public sector have declined and are reaching unhealthy levels in selected areas. There is need for quality, outcome and transparency.

There is also need to indicate how future reform initiatives will address these issues and ensure that Hong Kong's future healthcare system will be able to hold the line on costs while maintaining quality, attracting and retaining the most qualified staff and providing access to affordable care. In other words, the future healthcare system need to provide value added or quality services at low unit costs. The key focus of reform should therefore be about productivity improvements, releasing the potentials of healthcare workers and rewarding excellence of performance. The public should not be misguided to focus on financing, although that is an important aspect of the total reform agenda.

(3) ADVANCED TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW DRUGS

It has been argued that we spend more on medicine because there is more medicine can do. Strategic adoption and use of advanced technologies and new drugs that are proven to be cost effective should be hallmarks of Hong Kong's future healthcare system if it is to benefit its residents and gain a competitive advantage within the Greater China domain and internationally. This means a different model of cooperation, collaboration or partnership between the public and private sectors as well as between suppliers and providers.

The future healthcare system should ensure that new energy, new opportunities, new investments and new ways of doing things are integral components of reform. Done properly, healthcare can fuel economic growth and bring in outside money to contribute to its own development, instead of continuing to rely on government funding and user contribution. The future healthcare system does not have to be an increased burden to government and to society.

(4) PRIMARY CARE AND FAMILY DOCTOR

The concept and the mode of delivery of primary care, especially its relationship to

medical specialists and healthcare providers who are not doctors, should be made explicit. How will freedom of choice be enhanced and barriers of access eliminated? If primary care is to be a cornerstone of the future healthcare system, Hong Kong residents and users of healthcare services should be given a clear picture of how primary care will work in practice. This includes how and how much public financing (and for that matter, individual out-of-pocket payments) will link to primary care services provision.

Further, there is also need to clarify where and how much primary care can add value to the total array of healthcare in the Hong Kong context. In particular, how can it save money (if intended to do so) and improve the quality of care for patients? The public needs to be convinced that primary care will facilitate, not inhibit, their timely access to appropriate specialist care so as to achieve better health and outcomes

(5) LONG-TERM CARE

It is projected that rapid population ageing will be unavoidable in Hong Kong. And, chronic illnesses and, accordingly, long-term care, will be major issues. But how will long-term care be financed and delivered?

When someone has an onset of chronic illness, can this person rely on the public system for life-long care? How long will be the waiting list to get into the public system? Can one with chronic illnesses with stabilized conditions be able to continue to rely on care of a specialist in the public system? Or will he be discharged to a general practitioner or primary care provider in the private sector?

We hope the comments and views above will be taken into consideration while preparing for the next consultation paper. We urge that FHB addresses fully the aforementioned issues. Hong Kong deserves a leading edge healthcare system that is affordable, that gives its residents security and that contributes to its social and economic well-being.

Sincerely,

S H Lee

Chairman

(Submitted on behalf of the Board of Governors)