



香港精神健康護理學院有限公司
THE HONG KONG COLLEGE OF MENTAL HEALTH NURSING LTD

P.O. Box 92585, Tsim Sha Tsui Post Office, Kowloon, Hong Kong

5th June 2008

Dr York Chow
Secretary for Food and Health
Food and Health Bureau
19/F Murray Building
Garden Road
Central, Hong Kong
Fax (852) 21022525 (total no. of pages: 5)
Email beStrong@fhb.gov.hk

Dear Dr. Chow,

Comment on the Healthcare Reform Consultative Document
Your Health, Your Life

We are writing on behalf of the members of the Hong Kong College of Mental health Nursing to express our views on the captioned document. We welcome the discussion paper on the future service delivery model for our health care system. Compared to other countries, the health care system in Hong Kong offers good quality medical care for all citizens at a reasonable cost to the Government and is good value for money. Such a system may not be sustainable in the future because of the expected escalation of health care demand in acute care. It is timely to examine health care delivery system in Hong Kong.

Many of the recommendations made by the Consultation Document are worthy of support. We welcome the development of an electronic database of patient record. A system that allows access to patient's medical record under the consent of the patient in order to avoid the duplication of the services (e.g. investigation, treatment) and minimize the unnecessary health services cost.

We welcome the emphasis on the enhancement of primary care. The changes in the socio-cultural-economical structure have led to problems like abandoned elders, suicides, domestic violence, neglected youths, and over-stressed people. We also see the return of infectious diseases. We understand the doubled burden of chronic non-communicable diseases. There are also increasing problems with occupational health and safety. All these pose difficulties and demands onto our health care services. More efforts are needed in the area of promoting health and preventing both physical and mental illnesses.

The consultative document appears to equate primary care to primary medical care. Preventive care or primary care does not just involve family doctors or medical care. Primary care encompasses health maintenance, health promotion and disease prevention. Many health care professionals, such as nurses, contribute significantly to primary health care services in Hong Kong. For example, mental health nurses conduct mental health promotion programs to the public, provide counseling services in schools and workplace, and facilitating family support.

Bringing the preventive services to the grass root community will contribute to promotion of the general health status, hence relieving the burden on the expensive medical services. For example, preventive care is important for the elderly population. However, there are very few services in Hong Kong providing free regular health checks for elderly population and the majority of them could not afford going to the private services. There is a need for the Government to commit resources to establish more preventive care services in Hong Kong. Nurses can make significant contribution in this area.

Mental health problems have become increasingly severe in Hong Kong, resulting in enormous economic loss, care burden, and social unrest. We are disappointed about the current commitment of the Government to mental health care in Hong Kong which is grossly inadequate. With the deinstitutionalization movement, many mentally ill persons are being cared for in the community. Community support for discharged mentally ill persons is severely insufficient. There is also insufficient community support to persons with persistent mental illnesses. For example, it is not uncommon that each Community Psychiatric Nurse has a caseload of 70-80 patients. Thus, relapse and tragic incidents such as homicide and suicide related to mentally ill persons, are not uncommon in Hong Kong. Local studies found that discharged mentally ill persons residing in the community with poor quality of life. The majority of them are unemployed and lived under poverty line. Deinstitutionalisation is not synonymous with de-hospitalisation. This is a complex process which needs a solid network of community alternatives. If the Government is committed to community care, there have to

be sufficient structural and financial support. Good quality community care is no cheaper than institutionalised care. In view of the heavy burden of disability produced by mental disorders, budgets for mental health promotion, early detection of mental disorders and treatment of mentally ill persons, need to be increased.

We recommend the expansion of Community Psychiatric Nurse Service to enable it to take up roles in monitoring and care for mentally ill persons to facilitate their recovery and prevent relapse. An upgrading of the health care system within the community is needed to receive patients with severe mental illness. We suggest that deinstitutionalization of the mental health service must be coupled with adequate post-discharge support by adequately funded community mental health services. Intensive social and vocational rehabilitation is necessary for them to integrate into the community.

To provide intensive care for persons with persistent mental illness in the community, we suggest setting up home care team. The function of the home care team is to give care and support to patients and their family at their home environment. Overseas studies have provided evidence of the effectiveness of home care in preventing relapse, preventing readmission, as well as improving quality of life for patients and their families. Mental health nurses can be the core members of home care team.

Reducing stigmatization towards mentally ill persons is an important step that enables mentally ill persons to integrate into the community. The Government should commit resources in improving mental health literacy of the Hong Kong public, so as to reduce stigma and discrimination against this group of people.

The increase in old age population brings about chronic physical and mental health problem associated with old age. Both international and local research studies indicate that nurses working in primary health care settings can provide care to patients with chronic illnesses, which is equivalent to or in some cases better than doctors in terms of client outcome, and the cost-effective use of human and material resources. In this time of health care reform and cost cutting, care provided by nurses offers good value for money. We suggest that the Government commit resources in establishing more nurse led clinics in the community. It could make a major contribution to reducing future health care costs.

To ensure that Hong Kong continue to enjoy high standard health care, in the long run, the Government has to commit its resources in providing adequate numbers of qualified health care professionals. At present, the workforce of mental health nursing is shrinking. Due to the

lack of long term nursing personnel planning, Hong Kong is experiencing a shortage of nurses, especially mental health nurses. To meet the demand for quality nursing care, there is a need to prepare qualified nurses to meet the challenge. At present, there is no University Grant Committee (UGC) funded programme to prepare Registered Nurse (Psychiatric). The present 518 first-year-first-degree places for nursing undergraduate programmes offered by UGC-funded institutions are all for preparing Registered Nurses (General). Mental health settings need quality nurses similar to general settings. Without quality nursing education, Hong Kong would not be able to provide quality mental health nursing care to its citizens. It is therefore important for the Government to fund first-year-first-degree places for mental health nursing undergraduate programmes in UGC-funded institutions.

A safety net for basic health care should be the responsibility of the government. We also recognize that with an aging population, advancing medical technology and escalating costs, no society, no matter how affluent, can provide everything for everyone for free. We therefore support that those who are fortunate enough to be able to afford health care should shoulder some of the responsibility. Further, the contributions of employers towards the health care of their employees have to be considered.

We also caution that there are many reasons underlying the rising medical cost in which many are ignored by the consultative document, such as ineffective use of resources, high pay health care administrators and ineffective health care bureaucracy, etc. These problems need to be addressed, such as whether the number of senior administrators is appropriate.

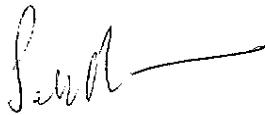
We support that health care burden should be shared by both the public and private sectors. The consultative document fails to address a basic important fact, the disparity in quality and cost between the private and public medical sectors. At present, service charges at private sectors are expensive and lacking in transparency. To direct patient flow from public to private sectors, the private sectors have to develop services that are affordable by the general public. The fee for service must be transparent and its quality controlled by accreditation body.

We demand immediate actions to reform the health care system in Hong Kong. Instead of using the HK\$50 billion in reserves to fund financing reform, the money should be used immediately to enhance primary care, develop electronic patient record and to enhance community services. We need not wait till we finalise the health care finance options.

In promulgating health care reforms we must not lose sight of the fact that under the present system, the citizens of Hong Kong enjoys a health care system that is of high quality, low cost, equitable and accessible. To ensure the Government has a healthy financial state to support the present and future health care system, it has to broaden the tax coverage. A healthy tax system can generate revenues and consolidate our capital revenue to support the present and future health care system development.

The members of the Hong Kong College of Mental Health Nursing are committed to work with the Food and Health Bureau to bring about a brighter future for Hong Kong. We are willing to contribute our time and energy in this endeavour. We look forward to the second phase consultation. Please contact us (chairperson@hkcmhn.org.hk) for any further action or information that you may require.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sally Chan', followed by a horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr. Sally Chan

President

Hong Kong College of Mental Health Nursing