

Dentists Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024 to be introduced into LegCo

The Government announced today (March 27) that the Dentists Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024 (the Bill) will be gazetted tomorrow (March 28), with the First Reading at the Legislative Council scheduled for April 10, to amend the legislative framework that has been in place since 1959.

The Bill proposes to create new pathways for admitting qualified non-locally trained dentists to practise in Hong Kong, introduce an internship for local dental graduates and a period of assessment for non-locally trained dentists to enrich their clinical experience, as well as update the regulatory regime for dental hygienists and dental therapists to tie in with the Government's policy direction of promoting oral health and dental care. The introduction of the Bill aims to increase dental manpower in Hong Kong to support public and subsidised dental services and enhance the overall standards of dental professionals to better protect users of dental services.

Admission of non-locally trained dentists

Hong Kong is now facing an acute shortage of dentists, with only 0.37 dentist per 1 000 population. This ratio is considerably lower than that in Mainland China and other advanced economies. Such a manpower shortage persists despite the fact that the Government had increased the number of local training places for dentists on four occasions (from 50 per year in the 2008-09 academic year to 90 per year in the 2022-23 academic year). In recent years, the manpower shortage has been particularly severe in the public sector which offers, amongst others, school dental care and other public dental services. As at January 1 this year, the vacancy rate of the Dental Officer grade of the Department of Health (DH) has reached 27 per cent (100 vacancies out of 370 posts).

With reference to the experience of admitting non-locally trained medical practitioners, the Bill will introduce new pathways for admitting qualified non-locally trained dentists, including the limited registration (LR) to be open to all dentists and the special registration (SR) to be provided for specialist dentists. For any non-locally trained dentist who is selected for full-time employment in a specified institution, including the DH, the Hospital Authority, the University of Hong Kong and the Prince Philip Dental Hospital, he or she may submit an LR or SR application to the Dental Council of Hong Kong (DCHK), and, upon approval, directly practise in the aforementioned specified institution.

If a non-locally trained dentist has served in a specified institution(s) for at least five years in aggregate and is certified by the employing specified institution(s) to have served satisfactorily, an LR dentist will be exempted from taking part of the licensing examination while an SR dentist may be exempted from taking part or all of the licensing

examination subject to the DCHK's consideration in accordance with the nature of work undertaken by the dentist. The non-locally trained dentist will be eligible for full registration to practise in any institution in Hong Kong after passing the required part of the licensing examination.

The Bill will also introduce temporary registration (TR) to enable dentists from other jurisdictions to perform clinical teaching or research in Hong Kong for a period not exceeding 14 days. A TR dentist cannot migrate to full registration.

Internship and period of assessment

To further enhance the professional standard of dentists, the Bill will require local dental graduates and non-locally trained dentists who opt to take the licensing examination directly to undergo a one-year internship or period of assessment before obtaining full registration by modelling on the prevailing practice for medical practitioners. The requirement will enhance their clinical experience in real-life work settings and enable them to get familiar with the practice in Hong Kong, thereby safeguarding patients' safety to a greater extent.

Under the new requirement, local dental graduates will need to undergo a one-year internship before obtaining full registration. As students of the local Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme about to graduate this summer have started to seek employment, the internship requirement will apply to local dental graduates of the class of 2025 and thereafter at the earliest.

As for non-locally trained dentists who are not admitted to Hong Kong through LR or SR but opt to take the licensing examination directly, they will, upon passing the licensing examination, need to undergo a period of assessment for one year (or a duration specified by the DCHK, subject to the dentist's clinical experience) before obtaining full registration.

The exact timing for implementing the above arrangements for internship and period of assessment will hinge on the actual legislative progress.

Registration system for dental care professionals

At present, two categories of ancillary dental workers in Hong Kong directly provide dental care services to patients under the supervision of dentists. They include:

(1) Dental hygienists (Note): To perform preventive dental care (e.g. oral examination, education, teeth cleaning and polishing, fluoride application, as well as scaling); and

(2) Dental therapists: Currently employed by the DH only to provide school dental care service and perform preventive dental care and basic curative dental care (e.g. filling and extraction).

The Bill will update the regulatory regime for ancillary dental workers

by introducing a statutory registration system, while retitling the relevant workers as dental care professionals (DenCPs). Meanwhile, the Bill will suitably adjust the scope of practice of dental hygienists and dental therapists on a risk-based approach by specifying the types of dental work they can perform and the related conditions. This serves to establish the professional status of these workers, while ensuring their service quality under a more formalised regulatory regime to safeguard the rights of patients.

Upon legislative amendment, dental hygienists and dental therapists must be engaged by a registered dentist(s), or a partnership, organisation, establishment or body corporate which has engaged registered dentist(s), for practice. The Government expects the DCHK to put in place the statutory registration system for DenCPs within three years after passage of the Bill to enable dental therapists to work in organisations other than the DH (including those in the public or private sector).

Other amendments

The Bill will specify continuing professional development as a mandatory requirement for dentists and DenCPs in a bid to maintain their professional competencies, and also revamp the composition and structure of the DCHK to cater for its additional statutory functions. Furthermore, the Bill will make other technical amendments, such as updating the definition of practising dentistry, to bring the regulatory regime up to date.

Note: The existing Chinese title of dental hygienists (牙科衛生員) is not in line with that of dental therapists (牙科治療師). Their current scope of work is not limited to teeth (牙科) (such as taking x-ray films inter-orally or extra-orally for the investigation of lesions of the mouth, jaw, teeth and associated structures). The Government will rename the title as "牙科治療師" when introducing the statutory registration system.