

Government responds to media reports on telemedicine services and medical and health sector's support to fight against epidemic

The Government noted recent media reports that the Medical Council of Hong Kong (MCHK) does not allow doctors to provide telemedicine services and that the Government had not provided support to the medical and health sector to fight against the epidemic. In this regard, the Government today (March 16) makes the following clarifications to set the record straight.

(1) Telemedicine services

In December 2019, the MCHK issued the Ethical Guidelines on Practice of Telemedicine (the Guidelines) (www.mchk.org.hk/files/PDF_File_Ethical_Guidelines_on_Telemedicine.pdf) to provide guidance on the provision of telemedicine services by doctors. In the light of the COVID-19 epidemic and the significant increase in the demand for medical support by the public, the Government wrote to the MCHK on February 15 this year, noting that since there were practical needs for the Hospital Authority (HA) and the private healthcare sector to provide telemedicine services to COVID-19 patients, such services should not be considered as a breach of the Guidelines when the city was joining efforts to fight against the epidemic. The Government also noted that some doctors associations had written to the MCHK earlier to seek clarifications on whether a prior "doctor-patient relationship" was required before practising telemedicine. The MCHK issued Questions and Answers to the Guidelines (www.mchk.org.hk/files/Questions_and_Answers_to_the_Ethical_Guidelines_on_Practice_of_Telemedicine.pdf) in early March this year to allay relevant concerns. The MCHK has made clarifications on the parts of the Guidelines that an in-person consultation between a doctor and a patient prior to telemedicine is advisable but not mandatory.

On March 9, the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, had a meeting with the representatives of the medical and health sector from various healthcare professional bodies, medical and nursing schools of tertiary institutions, medical organisations, healthcare institutions and non-governmental organisations via video conferencing to discuss various joint efforts made by the medical and health sector in the fight against the epidemic, which include private hospitals continuing to admit more patients referred by the HA; enhancing healthcare services to support elderly patients; providing medical support in community isolation facilities; joining the HA's anti-epidemic team; assisting in speeding up COVID-19 vaccination; private hospitals and private clinics continuing to admit patients and community pharmacies continuing to operate; providing telemedicine services to COVID-19 patients; and enhancing dissemination of

anti-epidemic information and information on COVID-19 treatment to the public. Professor Chan also encouraged more private hospitals, medical groups, healthcare professionals, etc. to provide free telemedicine services to members of the public (including COVID-19 patients). During the meeting, the Chairman of the MCHK was particularly invited to brief the attendees on the contents of the Guidelines and the stance of the MCHK, with a view to addressing attendees' concerns about telemedicine services for COVID-19 patients. The Government was pleased to note that individual private hospitals and healthcare institutions had already launched telemedicine support services for members of the public and COVID-19 patients.

(2) Support for the healthcare sector to fight against the epidemic together

The Government expresses gratitude to all healthcare professionals for standing fast at their posts and serving the public in the frontline since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic. The Government understands that healthcare professionals, in particular those who practise in the private sector, might encounter difficulties in procuring personal protective equipment (PPE). Adequate PPE is indeed needed by healthcare professionals in the private sector to protect the health of the staff and patients in their private healthcare premises. In this connection, the Government provided a total of 500 000 masks for free to different healthcare professionals in mid-2020 to support them to fight hand in hand with the Government against the epidemic.

In view of the development of the fifth wave of the epidemic, the Government decided earlier to further distribute PPE, including masks, gowns, face shields, goggles, etc., to the private healthcare sector. The Food and Health Bureau is now following up on the distribution with various relevant professional organisations. The PPE is expected to be distributed to various healthcare professionals later this month.

The Government expresses gratitude to the medical and health sector for responding to the call to make all-out efforts in mobilising healthcare professionals within a short period of time to support the Government's various anti-epidemic measures. The Government will continue to support healthcare professionals to fight against the epidemic and make concerted efforts with the industry so that Hong Kong can overcome the epidemic soon.