

Keynote address by SLW at Social Innovation Regional Forum 2021 on “The Making of Age-friendly Communities in Rapidly Ageing Societies” (English only)

Following is the keynote address by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, at the Main Forum of the Social Innovation Regional Forum 2021 on "The Making of Age-friendly Communities in Rapidly Ageing Societies" this afternoon (December 10):

Professor W T Wong (Deputy President and Provost of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Professor Wong Wing-tak), Ms Winnie Ying (Head of Charities (Grant Making), Hong Kong Jockey Club), Mr Ling Kar-kan (Director of the Jockey Club Design Institute for Social Innovation of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon. I am very glad to be here in this Forum. I am not really prepared to talk about policy today. I would like to focus on the issue of attitude towards ageing.

Let me begin with telling you one of my favourite eavesdropping stories. Back 20-something years ago, one day I was having a late lunch in the university canteen. A couple of undergraduate students were talking about ageing in the next table. One guy said, "People should not be that old. I would rather die at the age of 40." And there was a hail of agreement from the other guys. I thought then, "Should I drop dead immediately?" Well, these guys were only around 20 years old – 40 years old means doubling their age, not to mention 60 years old, which should be to them very, very old.

Once I said in a radio programme that "if everyone lived till age 120, then 60 years old would be just at the middle". According to the Wikipedia, the oldest person whose age had been independently verified is Jeanne Calment (1875-1997) of France, who lived to the age of 122 years and 164 days. The oldest verified man ever is Kimura Jiroemon (1897-2013) of Japan, who lived to the age of 116 years and 54 days. We do not really know what the possible upper limit of our life is. Some said 125. Many more disagree. What is more interesting, though, is the public reaction to my hypothetical statement. I was quoted frequently that I said 60 years old is just middle age and many make fun of it. Why do people make fun of it? Likely it is because most people do consider 60 as old.

Most people, when they are talking about ageing population, they will quote the figures about the number of people aged 65 or above now and then the number of people aged 65 or above some 20 or 30 years later. For instance, in mid-2021, we should have 1.43 million persons aged 65 or above

in Hong Kong, and by mid-2051, there would be about 2.7 million, according to the projection made by our Census and Statistics Department back in 2019. I have asked my colleagues at the Labour and Welfare Bureau not to quote such figures. I said these numbers are not particularly important for policy. Most people in our long-term care service network are aged 80 something or above. I would rather quote the figures for those aged 85 or above. In mid-2021 it was 228,000 and by 2051 it would be about 833,000, i.e. 3.65 times that number now.

Let's come back to the issue of attitudes towards age. The key issue is acceptance. I have to accept the facts that I am getting slower, lower, and weaker, the opposites of the Olympic motto, as an inevitable process of ageing. However, we can still be very active, doing regular exercise and can still be very healthy.

How can we then promote the acceptance of the general public towards ageing? As the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, I always find myself in a difficult position. On one hand, most people tend to underestimate how long one may live and there is a general misunderstanding of what the published life expectancy at birth means to them. For instance, when a man aged 65 hears that in 2020 the life expectancy of males is 82.9, he would think that he would have on average of only 17.9 years to live. This is very wrong. It is more likely than not that he will have another 25 years to go, and has more than a one in eight chance to live beyond the age of 100. This gross under-estimation will undermine one's own retirement planning and such prevalence of underestimation in our community will amount to a gross unpreparedness of the whole community towards an ageing society. On the other hand, when I speak from time to time about the ageing tsunami, trying to highlight the challenges if we do get ourselves prepared, it would give the impression that ageing is a problem and the elderly population is a burden. On the balance, I do consider that our society is ill-prepared for the coming of an ageing society and thus I would still use the term "ageing tsunami" even though it has a negative connotation. Currently, we are suffering from not having enough doctors, nurses, all kinds of health professionals, hospital beds and nursing homes. This is the time we have to do some catching up.

I did make a projection back in 2015 about the number of people having dementia. By now, the number should be about 155,000. By 2061, it would be about 394,000, constituting about 5 per cent of the Hong Kong population, if there were no advancement in our prevention efforts and medical treatment. It also means that we will find one out of 20 persons on the street would be having dementia.

I would say that the only way deal with this possible prevalence of dementia in our society is to build an age-friendly community that will allow all these happy wanderers with dementia to enjoy their free movement in the city and yet when needed we can always provide the support to these elderly and bring them home.

I look forward to the exchanges in this Forum and the generation of ideas that can help our society to be better prepared for the future.