

LCQ10: Mental health services

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 28):

Question:

It has been reported that a survey conducted early this year interviewed 2 700-odd members of the public. The survey findings show that, after experiencing the coronavirus disease 2019 epidemic and complying with the various social distancing measures for more than one year, about 20 per cent to 30 per cent of the respondents suffered from moderate to severe emotional disturbances, and about 40 per cent of them felt isolated. On the other hand, some parents have indicated that during class suspension for schools implemented on a number of occasions last year, they had to spend more energy on taking care of their children and assisting them in learning at home, which made them feel very stressful. At the end of last year, a parent committed suicide and died allegedly due to problems in teaching her child to do homework. Regarding mental health services, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it has conducted any survey on how the mental health of members of the public has been affected by the epidemic; if so, of the findings;

(2) of the number of attempted or fatal suicide cases reported last year which were suspected to be related to the emotional disturbances caused by the epidemic, as well as the details of such cases, including the number, age and gender of the persons concerned, and whether they were unemployed (if so, how long they had been unemployed);

(3) whether it knows the following information about the mental health services (including in-patient services) under the Hospital Authority (HA) in each of the past five years:

(i) the total number of patients and, among them, the number of those who were patients with severe mental illness,

(ii) the attendance at the psychiatric specialist outpatient clinics, and

(iii) the respective numbers of psychiatric doctors, psychiatric nurses, clinical psychologists and occupational therapists;

(4) whether it has assessed if the demand for the mental health services under the HA will increase in the coming year due to the epidemic; if it has assessed and the outcome is in the affirmative, whether the Government will allocate additional resources to the HA for recruiting more healthcare personnel;

(5) whether it knows the latest progress of the HA's current application of information technology in the HA's mental health services for providing tele-consultation services;

(6) whether it will allocate additional resources to social welfare organisations for enhancing mental health tele-support services;

(7) whether it will establish an online emotional support platform for the provision of emotional support services by professional counsellors to members of the public suffering from emotional disturbances; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(8) whether, in the coming year, the Government will enhance mental health support measures for different target groups (e.g. students, parents and healthcare personnel); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised by Dr the Hon Chiang Lai-wan is as follows:

(1) and (2) The Government has not commissioned any institutions to undertake mental health surveys in connection with the COVID-19 epidemic, nor has it conducted any researches on whether attempted suicide or suicide cases are related to the epidemic.

(3) (i) The table below sets out the total number of psychiatric patients treated and the number of patients diagnosed with schizophrenic spectrum disorder in the Hospital Authority (HA) from 2016-17 to 2020-21 (projection as at December 31, 2020).

Year	Total number of psychiatric patients treated (Note 1) (including inpatients and patients at specialist outpatient clinics (SOPCs) and day hospitals)	Number of patients diagnosed with schizophrenic spectrum disorder (Note 1 and 2)
2016-17	240 900	49 100
2017-18	251 300	49 800
2018-19	261 800	50 400
2019-20	270 700	50 500
2020-21 (projection as at December 31, 2020)	271 700	50 400

Notes 1: Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred.

Notes 2: In the HA, patients with severe mental illness generally refer to

those suffering from schizophrenic spectrum disorder and do not include severely mentally ill patients diagnosed with other disorders.

(ii) The table below sets out the total number of attendances of psychiatric SOPCs in the HA from 2016-17 to 2020-21.

€	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21 (provisional figures)
Total number of attendances of psychiatric SOPCs	859 338	873 141	897 777	901 284	916 802

(iii) The table below sets out the numbers of psychiatric doctors, psychiatric nurses, clinical psychologists and occupational therapists working in the psychiatric stream of the HA from 2016-17 to 2020-21 (as at December 31, 2020).

Year	Psychiatric Doctors (Note 3 and 4)	Psychiatric Nurses (Note 3 and 5) (including Community Psychiatric Nurses)	Clinical Psychologists (Note 3)	Occupational Therapists (Note 3)
2016-17	349	2 493	90	257
2017-18	347	2 588	86	263
2018-19	351	2 670	90	263
2019-20	370	2 814	93	278
2020-21 (as at December 31, 2020)	390	2 905	105	301

Note 3: Figures are calculated on a full-time equivalent basis, including permanent, contract and temporary staff, and excluding staff in the HA Head Office.

Note 4: Psychiatric doctors refer to doctors working for the specialty of psychiatry except interns.

Note 5: Psychiatric nurses include nurses working in psychiatric hospitals (i.e. Kwai Chung Hospital, Castle Peak Hospital and Siu Lam Hospital), nurses working in psychiatric departments of other non-psychiatric hospitals, and all other nurses working in the psychiatric stream.

(4) The HA has earmarked additional funding of around \$156 million (including additional recurrent funding of around \$147 million) in 2021-22 for

addressing the escalating demand for psychiatric services across different age groups in both hospitals and community settings. Relevant measures include:

1. enhancing psychiatric services for children and adolescents (C&A) by developing specialised C&A psychiatric services in both Hong Kong East and Kowloon Central Clusters in phases, and strengthening the collaboration between paediatricians and psychiatrists in Kowloon West Cluster;
2. increasing manpower to tie in with the expansion of the Student Mental Health Support Scheme to more schools in the 2021/22 school year by the Food and Health Bureau;
3. enhancing community psychiatric services by recruiting additional case managers;
4. enhancing psychogeriatric outreach services;
5. supporting the upcoming service commencement of the new Kwai Chung Hospital; and
6. enhancing psychiatric in-patient services.

The HA will keep in view the situation, continue to review and monitor its services to meet patients' needs, and allocate additional resources in a timely manner to cope with new service demands that may arise.

(5) During the COVID-19 epidemic, the HA has maintained normal consultation services in psychiatric SOPCs for patients to attend scheduled follow-up medical appointments. Patients who have rescheduled their appointments due to the epidemic will be given drug refills as appropriate to ensure that they have the necessary medication. If necessary, hospitals will provide services through other channels for suitable patients, e.g. following up their conditions by phone.

Meanwhile, the HA's psychiatric units are piloting a mobile application for provision of telehealth services. For example, tele-consultations will be arranged when providing elderly psychiatric outreach service for suitable patients living in residential care homes for the elderly.

(6) and (8) The Chief Executive announced in the 2020 Policy Address that in view of the social unrest in 2019 and the persisting COVID-19 epidemic since early 2020, which had brought different levels of impact and influence on the mental well-being of people, the Government decided to provide additional resources of \$300 million under the Beat Drugs Fund to better support the needy in the community and raise public awareness of mental health. The Advisory Committee on Mental Health (ACMH) is responsible for co-ordinating the initiative, and will work with service providers and non-governmental organisations in the sector to identify needs and set priorities, with a view to facilitating or promoting projects as appropriate.

A draft framework for the funding scheme was endorsed by the ACMH at its meeting in February 2021, details of which are being firmed up. Proposals will be invited in due course.

Separately, primary and secondary school students enrolled in the

Student Health Service (StdHS) will be given an annual appointment to attend the Department of Health's Student Health Service Centre for health check-ups, which include the use of the Health Assessment Questionnaire to help screen for psychological and behavioural problems, interviews, counselling, health promotion activities and follow-up work. Students screened to have physical and/or psychological problems will be referred to Special Assessment Centres, specialist clinics, school social workers, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) or other appropriate service providers for follow-up. In the coming year, the StdHS will further strengthen liaison and communication with various stakeholders, whereas doctors and nurses will keep contact with students referred to psychiatry to follow up on their progress and provide appropriate support.

(7) The SWD and the HA provide mental health hotline services to offer emotional support to members of the public. Various non-governmental organisations also provide online platforms for emotional support, such as "Open UP", "Counseline@MHAHK", "eSm^_^iley Cyber Youth Support Team" and "Caritas Infinity Teens – Cyber Youth Support Team". Target audience of the service cover the youth, parents, as well as people in need of emotional support and suicide prevention. The relevant information and hyperlinks are available on the one-stop thematic website of "Shall We Talk", the mental health promotion and public education initiative launched by the ACMH.