LCQ12: Development of the Chinese herbal medicine industry

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Hoey Simon Lee and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (January 15):

Question:

It is learnt that an organisation has earlier on launched a trading platform for Chinese herbal medicines to promote the development of the Chinese medicine (CM) industry. There are views that as CM is deemed to be the Chinese cultural legacy, Hong Kong can capitalise on its strengths to promote transformation of the CM industry towards high-end development (especially in the areas of trading, testing and certification) and develop CM into a globally influential "Made in China" brand, so as to contribute to the promotion of Chinese culture. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as the 2024 Policy Address proposes to explore the application of big data to foster international research collaboration on herb-drug interaction so as to promote the internationalisation of CM, whether the Government will work with the Mainland to formulate an information exchange mechanism regarding CM data and the related application of artificial intelligence, with a view to supporting the development of CM towards internationalisation;

(2) as there are views that developing standards for Chinese materia medica is conducive to the development of the CM industry, but there are inconsistencies between the Pharmacopoeia of the People's Republic of China implemented in the Mainland and the Hong Kong Chinese Materia Medica Standards formulated in Hong Kong at present, whether the Government has plans to further harmonise the two sets of standards;

(3) to promote the trading of Chinese medicines both within and outside the country, whether the Government has plans to further apply the testing and certification mechanism of the Government Chinese Medicines Testing Institute to international commercial activities; and

(4) to facilitate the development of the whole industrial chain for the CM sector, whether the Government has considered further improving the policies relating to Chinese herbal medicines and decoction pieces, including the relevant supporting facilities for storage and logistics?

Reply:

President,

The Government has been committed to promoting the all-round, high-quality and high-standard development of Chinese medicine (CM) in Hong Kong.

To develop Hong Kong into a bridgehead for the internationalisation of CM, the Government makes use of Hong Kong's advantages in its healthcare system, regulatory regime, standard-setting, clinical research and trade, and other areas. The reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon Hoey Simon Lee is as follows:

(1) As one of the policy initiatives set out in "The Chief Executive's 2024 Policy Address", the Government will explore the application of big data to foster international research collaboration on herb-drug interaction to discover more evidence of clinical significance, thereby promoting the internationalisation of CM.

The Chinese Medicine Applied Studies and Research Funding Scheme under the Chinese Medicine Development Fund (CMDF) of the Health Bureau (HHB) has listed researches related to the application of innovative technology (such as big data and artificial intelligence (AI)) in CM as one of the priority research themes. The Scheme also encourages Hong Kong institutions to collaborate with their Mainland and international partners for promoting research and development on the application of data and AI in CM. Meanwhile, the CMDF is also preparing to engage institutions to conduct research projects on herb-drug interaction through the Strategic Theme Commissioned Project Funding Programme, with a view to facilitating research on herb-drug interaction and their clinical applications.

At the same time, serving as the flagship institution that promotes the development of CM in Hong Kong, The Chinese Medicine Hospital of Hong Kong (CMHHK) will work with CM hospitals on the Mainland to co-ordinate with local, Mainland and overseas partner institutions to develop a scientific research network and foster international research collaboration on herb-drug interaction, with a view to formulating internationally recognised guidelines for the use of Chinese and Western medicines and driving the integration of CM into the healthcare systems worldwide. To this end, CMHHK signed a strategic collaboration agreement with the Guangdong Provincial Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine and the TCM-Klinik Bad Kötzting in Germany in January 2024 and January 2025 respectively.

(2) The Pharmacopoeia of the People's Republic of China (Chinese Pharmacopoeia) is compiled and revised by the Chinese Pharmacopoeia Commission. It is applicable to Mainland China and covers Chinese medicines, Western medicines, biological products, etc. The Chinese Pharmacopoeia is currently divided into four volumes, with Volume I covering the standards of Chinese herbal medicines (Chms) and proprietary Chinese medicines. The Chm standards in the Chinese Pharmacopoeia are meant to: (i) regularise the sources of Chms; (ii) regularise the technical requirements for testing, such as morphology, identification and assays; and (iii) serve as the regulatory standard for Chm testing and distribution on the Mainland. The implementation and application of the Chinese Pharmacopoeia promotes the standardisation and regularisation of Chms on the Mainland.

As for the Hong Kong Chinese Materia Medica Standards (HKCMMS) project launched by the Department of Health (DH) since 2002, its key role is to promote the modernisation and internationalisation of Hong Kong's Chinese

medicines sector and facilitate the international trade of Chinese medicines. As such, the categories of Chms under the HKCMMS and the contents of the standards are primarily based on the local needs of Hong Kong. After more than 20 years of development, the HKCMMS have been widely applied in different fields. They have also served as internationally recognised references and frameworks, and have been repeatedly cited in articles on Chinese medicines researches by overseas authoritative institutions and in international journals. Meanwhile, the International Advisory Board has been set up under the HKCMMS project, comprising representatives of experts in the field of herbal medicines from multiple countries, among which serving members of the Chinese Pharmacopoeia Commission provide guidance on the formulation of the HKCMMS, making it comparable to the standards with the Chinese Pharmacopoeia as well as pharmacopoeias of other countries.

(3) The mission of the Government Chinese Medicines Testing Institute (GCMTI) is to develop a set of internationally recognised reference standards for Chinese medicines and their products through state-of-the-art technology and scientific research. The GCMTI also promotes commercial application in the Chinese medicines and testing sectors through training and technology transfer programmes.

Apart from the HKCMMS, the GCMTI has so far completed 16 research and thematic projects of different disciplines, including macroscopic and microscopic identification, biotechnology and chemical analysis. The research results are published on the website of the DH's Chinese Medicine Regulatory Office for the reference of relevant stakeholders. Besides, the GCMTI has also strengthened the sector's quality control techniques and enhanced its overall competitiveness through technology transfer.

As at December 31, 2024, the GCMTI has organised 101 promotional activities for representatives from the CM practitioner, Chinese medicines and testing sectors, students of related disciplines, etc, to introduce the testing methods developed by the GCMTI and share research results, recording 5 783 attendances.

The Chinese medicines standards and testing methods developed by the GCMTI are established in strict accordance with related international requirements, where these tests will have to be acknowledged by international experts or verified by independent third parties to ensure their accuracy and repeatability. Therefore, by adopting the Chinese medicines standards and testing methods of the GCMTI to enhance quality control, the Chinese medicines sector can boost the international recognition and competitiveness of their products, thereby assisting enterprises in entering global markets.

(4) The HHB has been continuously providing the CM sector with a diverse array of subsidies and support through the CMDF, and has timely launched as appropriate and enhanced various funding schemes to cater for the actual needs of the sector. The Chinese Medicine Warehouse Management, Logistics and Services Improvement Funding Scheme under the CMDF covers equipment related to warehousing, logistics, identification and processes associated with Chms and decoction pieces. This aims to support the sector in enhancing its standards in warehouse management, logistics and services. As of December

2024, more than 650 projects of subsidised facilities have been approved under the relevant scheme, with funding provided to nearly 220 entities.

At the same time, Hong Kong has a robust regulatory system for CM. Regulated under the Chinese Medicine Ordinance (Cap. 549), Chinese medicines traders engaged in the wholesale and retail of Chms must apply for the relevant licences from the Chinese Medicines Board (CMB) under the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong. They are also required to comply with the requirements regarding aspects such as purchase, storage and transportation of Chms and decoction pieces in the practicing guidelines. Additionally, the CMB has established acceptable limits for the safety of Chms, including the maximum levels of pesticide residues, heavy metals and other harmful substances. These limits are reviewed and revised by the CMB from time to time to ensure that the Chms sold in Hong Kong meet the latest international safety standards.

The industrial chain for the CM sector encompasses a wide range of areas, including CM clinical services, the production and manufacturing of Chinese medicines products, professional training, testing and certification, standard-setting, trading and sales, research and innovation, as well as cultural dissemination. The co-operation and commitment of various parties are essential for promoting the all-round development of the CM industrial chain. The Government is collaborating with the CM sector to formulate the Chinese Medicine Development Blueprint, aiming at outlining the vision for the future development of CM in Hong Kong, reviewing the current situation of the sector on all fronts, conducting in-depth discussions on key areas, and drawing up long-term CM development strategies in Hong Kong, with a view to capitalising on Hong Kong's unique advantage of enjoying strong support from the motherland and maintaining close connection with the world, thereby propelling high-quality development and internationalisation of the CM sector.