

LCQ12: Provision of sign language interpretation services by Hospital Authority

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Kwok Ka-ki and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (June 3):

Question:

It has been reported that earlier on, a deaf-mute patient suffering from depression and with suicidal tendency was referred to the Kwai Chung Hospital for hospitalisation. As the Hospital had not arranged sign language interpretation services for that patient, the healthcare personnel could not communicate with him. After the patient's hospitalisation for two weeks, the Hospital arranged for his discharge on the grounds that its staff members had not been able to communicate with him and that he had wished to be discharged from hospital. The patient jumped to his death from a building on the next day after discharge from hospital. Regarding the provision of sign language interpretation services by the Hospital Authority (HA) for the deaf-mute, will the Government inform this Council if it knows:

(1) the details of HA's arrangements for the provision of sign language interpretation services, including (i) how long in advance a patient who needs to use the services when seeking consultation has to make a booking for the services, (ii) the circumstances under which a patient at the accident and emergency department will be provided with such services urgently, (iii) the number of sign language interpreters, and (iv) the weekly service timetable;

(2) whether HA allows patients to arrange, on their own, their family members or friends to provide sign language interpretation services, so as to facilitate their communication with healthcare personnel; if HA does, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(3) whether HA has formulated guidelines specifying that a doctor must take appropriate measures (e.g. arranging for sign language interpretation services or making use of writings) to ensure effective communication with a deaf-mute patient in situations such as diagnosing the patient and explaining the treatment options to the patient; if HA has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Hospital Authority (HA), I provide the

following reply to the various parts of the question raised by Dr the Hon Kwok Ka-ki.

(1) To cater for patients with special needs, the HA arranges sign language interpretation services for persons in need in public hospitals and clinics through various channels, including a service contractor and part-time court interpreters. As at end-May this year, the HA's service contractor had engaged a total of 16 sign language interpreters to provide interpretation services for patients from 8am to 10pm (Monday to Sunday including public holidays).

For scheduled services (e.g. medical consultations in general and specialist out-patient clinics), patients may at any time request the concerned hospital or clinic to arrange sign language interpretation services in advance. Staff of the hospital or clinic would contact the service contractor to arrange the services for patients in need. There is no time restriction on the service arrangement. When patients book their follow-up medical appointments, they may request for sign language interpretation services in one go to facilitate communication with healthcare staff. In urgent cases (e.g. urgent hospital admission), hospital staff would, where necessary, immediately arrange interpreters to the hospital to provide on-site interpretation services as soon as possible. Starting from mid-March this year, hospitals or clinics also provide sign language interpretation services for patients through video communication.

(2) Under normal circumstances, hospitals accept the interpretation arrangement of patients engaging their own sign language interpreter, or their family member or friend who knows sign language, to facilitate communication with healthcare staff.

(3) In general, healthcare staff provide optimal services for persons with hearing impairment with regard to the actual circumstances, including the arrangement of HA's sign language interpretation services to facilitate communication between patients and healthcare staff.

In view of the varying situations of different patients, such as emergencies that require immediate management, it is of paramount importance to HA in ensuring that healthcare staff can communicate effectively with patients through various channels. To this end, the HA has prepared response cue cards, disease information sheets and patient consent forms, covering information about common diseases, treatment procedures and HA's services, etc. with a view to enhancing the communication between hospital staff and patients in the process of registration and service delivery. Healthcare staff would communicate effectively with patients having regard to the actual circumstances and provide optimal healthcare services to cater for patients' needs. Therefore, the HA does not recommend mandating healthcare staff to communicate with the concerned patients through sign language interpretation.

The HA will continue to strengthen the promotion of sign language interpretation services to persons in need. Posters have been printed and displayed in public hospitals for publicity to facilitate patients' access to

relevant interpretation services.