

LCQ16: Measures to support persons with hearing impairment

Following is a question by the Hon Gary Zhang and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Mr Chris Sun, in the Legislative Council today (December 6):

Question:

Regarding measures to support persons with hearing impairment (HI), will the Government inform this Council:

(1) as a non-profit-making organisation has estimated that there are about 100 audiologists in Hong Kong, and their ratio to the population is 1:73 330, which is far below the ratios in neighbouring regions and countries (e.g. the ratio in Singapore being 1:51 136), whether the Government has regularly reviewed Hong Kong's manpower requirement for audiologists, and whether it will consider including audiologists in the Talent List to attract overseas professionals to practise in Hong Kong;

(2) as it is learnt that public hospitals and clinics under the Hospital Authority (HA) may arrange sign language interpretation services for persons with HI seeking consultation, whether the Government knows the number of cases of scheduled sign language interpretation services in each of the past five years, and if HA has received complaints about such services; if HA has, of the specific contents of such complaints; whether the Government knows the average waiting time for cases of emergency sign language interpretation services (e.g. provision of services for patients with HI in cases of their emergency admission to hospitals) in the past five years;

(3) of the number of persons with HI employed by the Government and its percentage in the total number of persons employed by the Government in each of the past five years; and

(4) in order to encourage more people to enter the profession of sign language interpretation for taking forward support services for persons with HI, whether the Government will consider creating additional civil service or non-civil service contract staff posts of sign language interpreters?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Health Bureau and the Civil Service Bureau on the Member's question, I set out below a consolidated reply:

(1) According to the 2019 Health Manpower Survey, it is estimated that Hong Kong has a total of around 90 audiologists. The Hong Kong Institute of

Audiologists (HKIA) is the recognised body for audiologists under the Department of Health's Accredited Registers Scheme for Healthcare Professions. As at June 2023, a total of 60 audiologists was registered under the HKIA. The Hospital Authority (HA) currently employs around 40 audiologists. Their attrition rate and vacancy are both lower than other grades. The HA will keep the service level under regular review, and on a need basis, employ additional manpower for service provision. The Health Bureau will closely monitor the manpower situation of different healthcare professions, and review the need for including other healthcare professions (including audiologists) into the Talent List where appropriate.

(2) In order to cater for patients with special needs, the HA has been arranging free sign language interpretation services for patients in need at its public hospitals and clinics through a service contractor and freelance interpreters for the Judiciary Administration. The HA also has guidelines in place for its staff on the arrangement of sign language interpretation services.

Patients in need may request the hospital and clinic concerned to arrange interpretation services in advance. For scheduled services, interpreters generally could arrive on time to provide the services. As for non-scheduled circumstances (such as hospital admission during emergency), the HA staff will, according to the need, immediately arrange interpreters to provide video-call or on-site interpretation services as soon as possible. In the past five years, for non-scheduled services, sign language interpreters have arrived at the relevant premises to provide interpretation services within one hour on average.

The case numbers of sign language interpretation services provided by the HA in the past five years are as follows:

| Year | Sign language interpretation services (number of cases) |
|---------|---|
| 2018-19 | 1 049 |
| 2019-20 | 991 |
| 2020-21 | 1 351 |
| 2021-22 | 1 582 |
| 2022-23 | 1 563 |

In the past five years, the HA has received two complaints regarding sign language interpretation services for individuals with hearing impairments. Both cases were related to inpatients alleging that the hospital failed to actively arrange for sign language interpretation services. With a view to enhancing support to hearing-impaired patients, posters have been printed and displayed at hospitals and clinics to enable patients to learn more about the interpretation services. Apart from provision of sign language interpretation services, the HA has also produced standard response cue cards, disease information leaflets and patient consent forms, which include

information on common diseases, treatment procedures and the HA services to assist individuals with hearing impairments, as well as enhanced training for frontline healthcare staff on relevant services.

(3) and (4) Currently, persons with disabilities can choose whether to declare their disabilities when they apply for government jobs. The same applies to serving civil servants. The Government does not and has no plan to require serving civil servants and job applicants to declare their disabilities. The Civil Service Bureau collects statistical information from bureaux/departments (B/Ds) on employment of persons with disabilities in the Government each year. B/Ds collect relevant information through different channels, such as when job applicants declare their disabilities on a voluntary basis and request for special arrangements in attending the selection test/interview having regard to their disabilities, or when serving employees apply for financial assistance to purchase technical aids to assist in their performance of duties. Given that declaration of disabilities is on a voluntary basis, the actual figure may be greater than the statistical figure.

The number of newly recruited civil servants known to have hearing impairment and its respective percentage in the newly recruited civil servants from 2018-19 to 2022-23 are set out in the table below :

| Year | Number of newly recruited civil servants known to have hearing impairment | Percentage in newly recruited civil servants of the year |
|---------|---|--|
| 2018-19 | 17 | 0.15 |
| 2019-20 | 24 | 0.22 |
| 2020-21 | 9 | 0.10 |
| 2021-22 | 19 | 0.21 |
| 2022-23 | 11 | 0.15 |

At present, the Government does not have civil service posts providing sign language interpretation services. B/Ds can consider the most appropriate way to provide/use sign language interpretation services after taking into consideration their operational needs and resources.