

LCQ17: Manpower of optometrists

Following is a question by the Hon Shiu Ka-fai and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (June 21):

Question:

Some operators of optical shops have relayed that the shortage of optometrists in Hong Kong has resulted in recruitment difficulties, which has affected the daily operation and development of their shops, and they have therefore proposed to bring in optometrists from the Mainland cities of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) to share some of the basic work of optometrists (e.g. work limited to refraction of eye examinations). On the other hand, the Government announced in May this year the expansion of the Talent List by increasing the number of professions covered from the original 13 to 51, and such professions include optometrists. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it knows the current number of registered optometrists in Hong Kong and, among them, the number of those who are employed in optical shops and work as frontline optometrists;
- (2) whether it has assessed the demand for and supply of optometrists in each of the next five years;
- (3) given that persons receiving relevant professional training for optometrists in other regions are required to apply to the Optometrists Board for registration before they can practise as optometrists in Hong Kong, whether it knows the respective numbers of persons receiving training in other regions who made applications and were allowed to become registered optometrists in each of the past five years (set out by the region in which they received training); and
- (4) whether it has assessed how the expansion of the Talent List helps bring in optometrists from the Mainland cities of GBA and even from the entire Mainland; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Government has been adopting a multi-pronged approach to tackle the problem of shortage of healthcare manpower, including strengthening training for local healthcare professionals and admitting non-locally trained healthcare professionals. The reply to the various parts of the question raised by the Hon Shiu Ka-fai is as follows:

- (1) As at end-April 2023, the total number of registered optometrists in Hong Kong was 2 244. Among them, 110 were working in the public and subvented sectors, while 2 134 were working in the private sector. According to the

results of the 2017 Health Manpower Survey, 89 per cent of the serving optometrists in the private sector were working in optical companies or shops.

(2) The Healthcare Manpower Projection 2020 (i.e. the last round of projection) showed that the optometrist supply dropped from 2017 onwards as a result of cohort retirement, resulting in severe manpower shortage. The shortage of local optometrists would persist by 2040. The demand for optometrist was projected to peak in 2035 before declining thereafter. According to the last round of projection, the manpower gap of optometrists (in full-time equivalents) over the coming five years from 2023 (i.e. 2023 to 2027) would be 151, 186, 223, 251 and 287 respectively. By 2040, the manpower gap (in full-time equivalents) would be 654. The Healthcare Manpower Projection 2023 (i.e. the new round of projection) is underway and is expected to be completed by the end of this year. Factors such as demographic and structural changes, increase in chronic patients, known and planned services and developments, etc. will be taken into account in projecting the future healthcare manpower requirements to meet service needs.

(3) and (4) The Optometrists Board (the Board) under the Supplementary Medical Professions Council (the Council) is a statutory body established under section 5 of the Supplementary Medical Professions Ordinance (Cap 359). The Board is responsible for the registration of optometrists and regulation of their professional conduct and practice. Applications for registration submitted by holders of non-local academic qualifications are subject to vetting and approval of the Council and the Board. The number of applications for registration as an optometrist submitted by holders of non-local academic qualifications and applications approved over the past five years (i.e. 2018 to 2022), broken down by the place of training, are set out at Annex. The Government announced in May 2023 the expanded Talent List, the coverage of which has been increased from 13 to 51 professions, with a view to attracting more high-quality talents to come to Hong Kong to meet our development needs. The inclusion of healthcare professions in the list not only provides immigration facilitation for those who have already fulfilled local registration requirements to work in Hong Kong, but also conveys the positive message that the Government is determined to attract qualified non-locally trained healthcare professionals to come to Hong Kong, which will have a positive effect in attracting talents.

The Government expects the new round of manpower projection exercise will be completed by end-2023. Subject to the projection results, the Government will review the strategies for increasing local healthcare manpower (including optometrists) and consider the need to further raise the number of healthcare training places or explore other new measures to admit qualified non-locally trained healthcare professionals.