

LCQ18: Treating patients suffering from depression

Following is a question by the Hon Elizabeth Quat and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (September 15):

Question:

I have learnt that there are currently over 300 000 people in Hong Kong suffering from depression. Among them, those with mild symptoms suffer from impaired functioning in their daily lives and those with severe symptoms have obvious suicidal tendencies. However, if such patients receive appropriate treatment early, most of them can recover. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows, among the patients in Hong Kong suffering from depression, the current number and percentage of those suffering from treatment-resistant depression, and whether the Hospital Authority (HA) currently provides targeted diagnostic and treatment services for such patients;

(2) as the statistics of the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong show that 1 019 persons in Hong Kong died of suicide in 2020, with the suicide rate hitting a five-year high of 13.61 (i.e. 13.61 persons died of suicide per 100 000 persons) and, among the deceased, 438 persons were 60 years old or above, accounting for 43 per cent of the number of deaths (with the figure representing an increase of 4.8 percentage points as compared to 2019 and being the highest since records were first kept in 1973), whether the Government (i) knows, among the persons who committed suicide last year, the number of those suffering from depression before they died and whether they had received treatment, and (ii) has reviewed the adequacy of the support as well as diagnostic and treatment services provided to elderly persons suffering from depression;

(3) as it has been reported that the existing medications and psychotherapy have insignificant effects on some patients suffering from depression, and more and more studies have confirmed that Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) therapy has a curative effect, coupled with the fact that approval has been given by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the United Kingdom and the Food and Drug Administration in the United States for the use of such therapy in treating depression, and the Australian Government has allocated an amount equivalent to approximately HK\$1.7 billion in this year's budget for implementing TMS therapy, of the information on TMS therapy currently provided in the public hospitals in Hong Kong (including the name of hospitals, the year in which such therapy became available, and the number of patients who have received treatment so far); whether the Government will request HA to fully introduce TMS therapy to provide patients suffering from

depression with treatment carrying a better curative effect; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) of the reasons for not introducing TMS as a treatment approach on the various websites of the Government and HA concerning depression?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Hospital Authority (HA), I provide our reply to the question raised by the Hon Elizabeth Quat as follows:

(1) The multi-disciplinary psychiatric teams of HA, comprising doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, occupational therapists, medical social workers, etc., have all along been providing healthcare services with a comprehensive and coherent approach for patients with varying degrees of mental health problems (including those suffering from depression). Healthcare professionals will provide appropriate in-patient, out-patient, day rehabilitation training and community support services for patients according to their needs and the severity of their conditions.

The Government and HA do not maintain statistics on the number of patients suffering from treatment-resistant depression. Hence, the requested information could not be provided.

(2) The Food and Health Bureau has commissioned the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong to conduct three territory-wide mental health prevalence surveys covering children aged six to 17, adolescents aged 15 to 24 and elderly aged 60 or above, with a view to finding out the prevalence and mental health needs of different age groups. The surveys are expected to be completed in 2023. Besides, we are planning to conduct a mental health prevalence survey on persons aged 16 to 75 at the next stage. We expect that the data so collected will provide a clearer picture on the estimated number of persons (including elderly suffering from depression) in need of mental health services, thereby enabling us to formulate the long-term directions for the development of such services.

As to whether the persons who committed suicide last year had suffered from depression before they died and whether they had received treatment, the Government does not have the relevant information.

(3) All HA clusters are equipped with Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) devices for treatment of depression. Psychiatric healthcare professionals in HA hospitals will refer patients with depression to receive TMS therapy as appropriate having regard to the patients' conditions and clinical needs.

(4) The Government and HA will review or update the contents of their websites as and when necessary.