

LCQ21: Dental care services

Following is a question by Dr the Hon Tan Yueheng and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (April 6):

Question:

Some members of the public have relayed that there are only 11 public dental clinics in Hong Kong, and the shortfall in services has very often driven members of the public to seek consultation from private dentists. Moreover, given the exorbitant fees charged by private dentists and the Government's inadequate support for the elderly in respect of dental services, many grass-roots elderly do not seek treatment until their conditions have aggravated, thus missing the opportunities to receive early diagnosis and treatment. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it will review the policy concerning the provision of dental services to the elderly and, by drawing reference from the practice of setting oral health goals for different age groups (i.e. people aged 5, 12, 18 and 35 to 44), set such goals for the elderly; if so, of the details;

(2) whether it will raise the amount of subsidy granted under the Elderly Dental Assistance Programme and relax the eligibility criteria; if so, of the details and timetable;

(3) given that the 40-odd government dental clinics in Hong Kong mainly provide services to civil servants and their dependants at present, and only a small number of them provide the public with general public dental services at designated sessions, whether the Government will consider assigning more clinics for providing such services and increasing the number of consultation sessions for such services; if so, of the details; and

(4) as there are views that the ratio of the number of dentists to the population is very low in Hong Kong, whether the Government has any measures in place to increase the number of dentists; if so, of the details and timetable?

Reply:

President,

My reply to the question raised by the Member is as follows:

(1) The Government's policy on dental care seeks to improve oral health and prevent dental diseases by raising public awareness of oral health and encouraging proper oral health habits through promotion and education.

The provision of comprehensive dental services for the community at large requires substantial financial resources. Dental care services in Hong Kong are mainly provided by the private sector and non-governmental organisations. In accordance with the prevailing policy, the Government mainly undertakes publicity, education (including the School Dental Care Service), promotion of oral health and provision of emergency dental services to the public, and takes forward initiatives targeting persons with special dental care needs, in particular elderly persons with financial difficulties and persons with difficulties accessing general dental services. The Government provides dental care support for low-income elderly persons with special needs through, inter alia, the Outreach Dental Care Programme for the Elderly and the Community Care Fund Elderly Dental Assistance Programme. Besides, elderly persons may use vouchers under the Elderly Health Care Voucher Scheme to receive private dental services.

The Department of Health (DH) conducts a territory-wide Oral Health Survey (OHS) every 10 years. Following the OHS 2001 and 2011, the DH commenced the OHS 2021 in late 2021 to collect information on the prevailing oral health conditions of the people in Hong Kong. The expert group of the DH will review the oral health goals for different age groups (including the elderly) and advise on the setting of more appropriate oral health goals taking into account the age groups set in the OHS 2001 and 2011, the local situation, and the results of the OHS 2021. The Government will, on this basis, explore ways to improve dental care services and formulate feasible measures with a view to achieving oral health goals.

(2) Since its expansion in February 2019, the Community Care Fund Elderly Dental Assistance Programme (the Programme) has already covered elderly persons who are Old Age Living Allowance recipients aged 65 or above. The total number of elderly persons participating in the Programme is about 630 000. The scope of subsidy under the Programme was further expanded in July 2021 to cover more subsidised dental treatment items so that eligible elderly persons in need may receive more targeted dental services on the fitting of removable dentures and related dental services (including oral examination, scaling and polishing, fillings, tooth extractions and X-ray examinations). New treatment items include the removal of bridges or crowns and the provision of root canal treatment, as well as free removable dentures and related dental services for a second time for elderly persons aged 75 or above who received dental services under the Programme at least five years ago. The Government will continue to review the implementation and situation of the Programme with a view to formulating long-term arrangements.

(3) Under the civil service terms of appointment, the Government is obliged to provide dental benefits for civil servants/pensioners and their eligible dependents. Dental clinics under the DH are established primarily for fulfilling this obligation and dental services thereat are essentially provided for the above groups. These dental clinics are not intended for the provision of comprehensive dental services for the general public, though we have utilised some capacity of these clinics to provide emergency services. Currently, government dental clinics are running at full service capacity with close to 100 per cent of the appointment slots occupied. It is not

possible for the DH to allocate more slots for general public dental sessions on top of the existing schedule.

(4) To meet the projected demand for dental manpower, the Government has been actively training local dentists. The annual intake of government-funded first-year-first-degree (FYFD) training places in dentistry has increased from 50 per cohort in the 2008/09 academic year to 80 per cohort to date. It is expected that there will be around 400 dental graduates becoming registered dentists in the coming five years. According to the projection of the Healthcare Manpower Projection 2020 published by the Food and Health Bureau in March 2021, the shortage of dentists will remain in the short to medium term. The Government will further increase the number of University Grants Committee-funded FYFD dental training places to 90 per cohort in the 2022/23 to 2024/25 triennium.