

LCQ3: Government-subsidised Chinese medicine outpatient services

Following is a question by Professor the Hon Chan Wing-kwong and a reply by the Acting Secretary for Health, Dr Libby Lee, in the Legislative Council today (November 8):

Question:

To tie in with the objective announced by the Government in the 2022 Policy Address, the Chinese Medicine Clinics cum Training and Research Centres (CMCTRs) established by the Hospital Authority, non-governmental organisations and local universities under a tripartite collaboration model in the 18 districts across the territory have increased their annual disc quota for government-subsidised Chinese medicine outpatient services (subsidised disc quota) to 800 000 since the 1st of last month. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it knows the total attendance at each CMCTR since January this year, as well as the current number and salary levels of Chinese medicine practitioners employed by each CMCTR;
- (2) whether it knows, following the increase in subsidised disc quota, the approximate daily service disc quota that can be provided by each CMCTR, as well as the criteria adopted by the authorities for allocating the subsidised disc quota; and
- (3) given that many members of the public have relayed that, following the increase in subsidised disc quota, it is still difficult to make an appointment for the relevant services and it is even "so hard to secure one single disc", whether the authorities will consider formulating new measures to meet the demand of members of the public; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

I would like to thank Professor Hon Chan Wing-kwong for his question. In consultation with the Hospital Authority (HA), the reply is as follows:

Chinese medicine (CM) is an integral part of Hong Kong's healthcare system. To promote the professional development and manpower training for CM in Hong Kong, we have established Chinese Medicine Clinics cum Training and Research Centres (CMCTRs) in all 18 districts across the city. They are run by the HA, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and universities under a tripartite collaboration model, with daily operation undertaken by the respective NGOs. In addition to the government-subsidised outpatient services, the CMCTRs also provide citizens with the option of other non-government-subsidised services. The CMCTRs also support services such as

integrated Chinese-Western medicine and Civil Service Chinese Medicine Clinic services, and bear the functions of nurturing CM talent and taking forward scientific research projects.

The CMCTRs provide services for over 1.2 million attendances each year on average, of which the annual quota of government-subsidised outpatient services has increased by more than 30 per cent from about 600 000 to 800 000 since October 1 this year. Recipients of the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance and recipients aged 75 or above of the Old Age Living Allowance are entitled to waiver of charges. The total number of attendances at CMCTRs from January to September 2023 is in Annex I.

As at the end of 2022, there were a total of 419 Chinese medicine practitioners (CMPs) of various ranks employed by CMCTRs across 18 districts. The relevant information is set out in Annex II. The terms of employment and remuneration package of the CMPs concerned are determined by their NGO employers. The respective NGOs review and adjust the salary level of CMPs from time to time based on the market situation every year. According to the information submitted by these NGOs at the end of 2022, the monthly salaries of CMP trainees at the 18 CMCTRs ranged from \$24,000 to \$34,000, while the monthly salaries of other CMPs of various ranks ranged from \$35,000 to \$110,000 depending on their experience, qualifications and duties. To our understanding, the salaries of the CMPs concerned would also be increased by about 4-5 per cent based on the personnel management mechanisms of individual NGOs in 2023-24. The aforementioned CMP trainees are newly graduated and registered CMPs who have chosen to work at the 18 CMCTRs to accumulate clinical experience. As indicated by the very positive responses of job applications received, the work nature and remuneration packages of the CMP trainees are attractive to applicants to a certain extent.

As regards the distribution of government-subsidised service quotas, the annual service quota of 800 000 are distributed evenly among the 18 CMCTRs. Generally speaking, half of the service quota distributed to each CMCTR will be allocated for appointment by patients with episodic illnesses, and the other half for follow-up consultation for patients. In addition, CMCTRs in various districts will flexibly adjust the allocation of their daily service quotas according to clinic operation and manpower arrangements, hence such quotas may vary. In line with the increased service quotas, CMCTRs in various districts have taken corresponding measures, including increasing the number of consultation rooms and treatment rooms, upgrading facilities and fittings of outpatient clinics, employing extra manpower.

Since the further increase of the service quotas, the overall service capacities of the 18 CMCTRs have risen in the first two weeks of October 2023 (Note). A service quota of about 2 900 is available daily, which is an increase of over 60 per cent compared with the same period last year (a daily quota of about 1 800). The average daily service quota of each CMCTR is about 130 to 160, a significant increase compared with the same period last year (about 90 to 110 daily).

On booking methods, at present, patients with episodic illnesses may call individual CMCTRs in the 18 districts or use the HA's "18 CM Clinics"

mobile application to make an appointment for government-subsidised CM services. Citizens who have previously registered for services at any of the CMCTRs may use the mobile application to make an appointment. Alternatively, they may ask their relatives or friends to do so on their behalf.

We will continue to work with the HA to review the usage of and demand for government-subsidised CM outpatient services, and increase the service capacities through re-provisioning of some CMCTRs. Hong Kong's CM services will also be greatly enhanced when the first Chinese Medicine Hospital in Hong Kong starts to commence service by phases in 2025. In parallel, we wish to liaise with the CM sector to formulate a Chinese Medicine Development Blueprint, in which we will conduct a comprehensive review on the long-term strategies and planning for the development of CM services as well.

I would also like to stress that CM outpatient services constitute an integral part of the primary healthcare system, and private service providers in Hong Kong play a significant role in delivering primary healthcare services. Contributing the majority of resources in the CM sector, the private sector has recorded around 10 million attendance for CM outpatient services per year. Currently, apart from providing subsidies for CMCTR services, the Government also offers Elderly Health Care Vouchers for elderly persons aged 65 or above to pay for private primary healthcare services rendered by CMPs. In 2022, the amount claimed for CM services was about \$850 million, with around 1.65 million transactions of voucher claims. We will continue to develop various primary healthcare services (including CM services) in accordance with the Primary Healthcare Blueprint, thereby optimising the use of resources in both the public and private CM sectors.

Thank you, President.

Note: From October 1 to 15, 2023.