

LCQ7: Dental hygienists

Following is a question by the Hon Holden Chow and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (January 17):

Question:

Regarding dental hygienists, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the number of persons enrolled as dental hygienists in Hong Kong in each of the past five years;
- (2) of the number of graduates from the Higher Diploma in Dental Hygiene programme jointly offered by the School of Professional and Continuing Education of the University of Hong Kong and the Prince Philip Dental Hospital in each of the past five years, and among which the number of those who have enrolled as dental hygienists;
- (3) whether the authorities have plans to amend the Dentists Registration Ordinance (Cap. 156) and the relevant subsidiary legislation to relax the requirement for dental hygienists to undertake specified work in accordance with the directions of a registered dentist who is available in the premises when the work is being carried out, so as to enable them to perform and handle independently some of the dental care work (e.g. cleaning and scaling of teeth, and exposure of oral X-ray films), thereby releasing the manpower of dentists to cope with the public's demand for dental services; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (4) whether the authorities have plans to increase the number of dental hygienists; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The Chief Executive announced in the 2022 Policy Address to conduct a comprehensive review of the dental services provided or subsidised by the Government. The Working Group on Oral Health and Dental Care (Working Group) was subsequently established in December 2022. The review covers policy objectives, implementation strategies, service scopes and delivery models of oral health and dental care, existing local dental services and supporting arrangements, primary dental services and manpower resources of dental professionals. With reference to the preliminary recommendations made by the Working Group earlier, the Chief Executive announced in the 2023 Policy Address a series of measures, to increase the manpower resources of dental professionals, including the introduction of the amendment bill to the Dentists Registration Ordinance (Cap. 156) into the Legislative Council to modernise the regulatory framework for dentists and ancillary dental workers (including dental hygienists and dental therapists), and to gradually increase training places for ancillary dental workers from 2023/24 academic

year, with a view to meeting the needs of enhancing the dental services for different age groups and target groups.

At present, there are two types of ancillary dental workers who provide dental care services to patients in Hong Kong, namely dental hygienists and dental therapists. Dental hygienists can work in the public or private sector, and may perform preventive dental care (e.g. education, consultation, risk assessment, regular screening, application of fluorides and scaling) in accordance with the directions of a dentist who is available in the premises at all times when such work is being carried out. Dental therapists work only under the Department of Health (DH) to provide the School Dental Care Service. Dental therapists may perform preventive dental care and basic curative dental care (e.g. dental restoration and extraction) in accordance with the directions of a dentist who is available in the premises at all times when such work is being carried out.

The reply to the questions raised by the Hon Holden Chow is as follows:

(1) and (2) According to the information provided by the Dental Council of Hong Kong, as at December 2023, the total number of dental hygienists enrolled under the Ancillary Dental Workers (Dental Hygienists) Regulations (Cap. 156B) is 612.

In the past five years, the number of newly enrolled dental hygienists in Hong Kong each year, who are graduates from the two-year Higher Diploma in Dental Hygiene programme co-organised by the Prince Philip Dental Hospital (PPDH) and the School of Professional and Continuing Education of the University of Hong Kong (HKU SPACE) or holders of non-local qualifications, are tabulated below:

Year	Number of newly enrolled dental hygienists
2019	23
2020	2
2021	34
2022	27
2023	54

Note: As a result of class suspension due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the enrolment of graduates for the Higher Diploma in Dental Hygiene programme from 2019/20 to 2021/22 academic year was postponed by one year respectively.

As for dental therapists, they are ancillary dental workers currently not required for statutory registration or enrolment. At present, all dental therapists posts are under the School Dental Care Service of the DH. As at December 2023, there are 237 dental therapists in the DH. Currently, persons who have graduated from the one-year Advanced Diploma in Dental Therapy programme jointly organised by the PPDH, the DH and the HKU SPACE (or equivalent qualifications) meet the professional requirement for the

application of dental therapist.

In the past five academic years, the respective number of graduates from the programmes of Higher Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Advanced Diploma in Dental Therapy are tabulated as follows:

Academic Year	Number of graduates	
	Higher Diploma in Dental Hygiene	Advanced Diploma in Dental Therapy
2018/19	22	10
2019/20	33	10
2020/21	27	9
2021/22	28	12
2022/23	26	10

(3) In its interim report recently released in December 2023, the Working Group considered that it is insufficient to merely rely on the dentist workforce to meet the needs for enhancing dental care services, and that ancillary dental workers could play a more significant role in dental care services. It also suggested exploring whether ancillary dental workers should be allowed to perform more primary dental services. The Government is considering to enable dental hygienists and dental therapists to perform preventive dental care (e.g. education, consultation, risk assessment, regular screening and application of fluorides) without the presence of a dentist, and dental therapists to perform basic curative dental care (e.g. dental restoration and extraction) in accordance with the directions of a dentist who is available in the premises at all times when such work is being carried out.

The Government plans to introduce the amendment bill to the Dentists Registration Ordinance into the Legislative Council in the first half of this year, which covers suitably adjusting the scope of work of ancillary dental workers, and introducing a statutory registration system for both dental hygienists and dental therapists to enhance the standard of professional training and management of ancillary dental workers under the regulatory control of the Dental Council of Hong Kong, with a view to establishing their professional status and ensuring patients' safety and service quality. After enhancing the training and professional development pathways for dental therapists, the Government will enable dental therapists to work in the public or private sectors in a timely manner so as to tie in with their roles in dental care services.

(4) To enhance local training, in addition to increasing training places for the current programmes of Higher Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Advanced Diploma in Dental Therapy, the Government is currently liaising with the Vocational Training Council for organising new course. The provision of training places of dental hygienists and dental therapists will be increased to nearly double from 95 in the 2023/24 academic year to 185 in the 2024/25

academic year.