

LCQ8: Support for elderly persons with swallowing difficulties

Following is a question by the Hon Kwok Wai-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Labour and Welfare, Dr Law Chi-kwong, in the Legislative Council today (August 18):

Question:

It is learnt that the number of elderly persons (i.e. persons aged 65 or above) in Hong Kong with swallowing difficulties has risen continuously in recent years due to an ageing population and, consequently, the demand for meal service suitable for them (including soft meals) has surged. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the number of elderly persons in each of the past five years who were assessed as having swallowing difficulties, and the current number of elderly persons with swallowing difficulties;

(2) given that the Government allocated a funding of \$75 million in the last financial year to provide subsidised residential care homes (RCHs) for the elderly and community care service units for the elderly with resources to provide soft meals to elderly persons with swallowing difficulties, of the following details of such measure: (i) the effectiveness, (ii) the number of elderly beneficiaries, (iii) the number of soft meals distributed, and (iv) the average cost of each set of soft meals and the amount of subsidy therefor; whether it has plans to extend the coverage of the measure to include those RCHs for the elderly participating in the Enhanced Bought Place Scheme and RCHs for persons with disabilities; if so, of the details;

(3) whether it knows the number of elderly persons ageing in place in each of the past three years who needed to have soft meals, with a breakdown by the type of community care services for the elderly which they received;

(4) as it is learnt that currently the major difficulty in promoting soft meals lies in the high costs of such meals, which are hardly affordable for many elderly persons, whether the Government will consider strengthening the support for the research and development of soft meals through the Innovation and Technology Fund for Application in Elderly and Rehabilitation Care, with a view to reducing the production cost of soft meals; and

(5) whether the Government will, in the long run, provide new services for elderly persons with swallowing difficulties, and of the new measures in place to encourage them to accept soft meals?

Reply:

President,

Having consulted the Food and Health Bureau (FHB), my consolidated reply

is as follows:

(1) The FHB and the Hospital Authority (HA) do not maintain statistics on the number of elderly with swallowing difficulty. Swallowing difficulty is a common health problem among the elderly. It is caused by degeneration or diseases like stroke, dementia or Parkinson's disease. If swallowing difficulty arises, healthcare professionals of the HA will provide clinical assessment, treatment and counselling for elderly with swallowing difficulty. They aim to prevent, reduce and overcome barriers in swallowing, which enhance the elderly's quality of life. Besides, healthcare professionals of the HA will assess the special dietary needs of the elderly and provide appropriate recommendation on modified food texture and liquid consistency.

(2) and (3) To provide soft meals for the elderly with swallowing difficulty, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) has, since October 2020, provided additional resources to subsidised residential care services including subvented residential care homes for the elderly (RCHEs)/nursing homes, contract homes, RCHEs providing services under the Residential Care Service Voucher for the Elderly, private RCHEs participating in the Enhanced Bought Place Scheme, and self-financing nursing homes participating in the Nursing Home Place Purchase Scheme; as well as subsidised community care services including Enhanced Home and Community Care Services for the Elderly, Integrated Home Care Services, Community Care Service Voucher for the Elderly and Day Care Centres/Units for the Elderly. As at end-March 2021, about 10 000 elderly persons receiving subsidised residential care services and about 2 400 elderly persons receiving subsidised community care services with such needs had been provided with soft meals. The SWD would from time to time review and enhance the arrangement for its various services.

The SWD does not maintain breakdown of figures required by these parts of the question.

(4) In December 2018, the Government allocated \$1 billion to set up the Innovation and Technology Fund for Application in Elderly and Rehabilitation Care (I&T Fund) to subsidise eligible elderly and rehabilitation service units to procure/rent and trial use technology products. Eligible elderly service units could apply for the I&T Fund to procure equipment, tool or technology product for the production of soft meals (e.g. puree diet system machine, cutter/mixer for soft diet, etc.).

(5) The Government always attaches importance to the provision of elderly services and will regularly review the needs of the elderly (including those with swallowing difficulty) with a view to providing appropriate services.