

Speech by CE at Hospital Authority Convention 2021 opening ceremony (English only) (with photos/video)

Following is the speech by the Chief Executive, Mrs Carrie Lam, at the Hospital Authority Convention 2021 opening ceremony today (May 3):

Henry (Chairman of the Hospital Authority (HA), Mr Henry Fan), Tony (Chief Executive of the HA, Dr Tony Ko), distinguished guests, healthcare professionals, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this year's Hospital Authority Convention. For the very first time, this year's HA Convention is being held both in-person and online. But that should not lessen the significance of this important gathering of health experts and professionals held annually since 1993 in championing for quality care for the people of Hong Kong. Indeed, the fact that we could host an in-person convention when many places around the world are still battling against the pandemic is a heartening confirmation of the strength and resilience of Hong Kong's medical and health system.

This year's HA Convention takes place as the Authority celebrates its 30th anniversary. If not because of COVID-19 and the Government's anti-epidemic measures in respect of border controls and social distancing, I am pretty sure that HA would have organised a celebratory get-together for all those who have helped to shape HA in the past three decades to have an occasion for reminiscence and renewing friendship. Had there been such an occasion, I would certainly attend as the Chief Executive of the HKSAR, but more affectionately, as a former HA Board member and a close partner of HA in my other official capacities. It is because of that association and affection, many of my colleagues will tell you that I am very passionate about how Government should devise its policies and plan Hong Kong's medical services with an aim to safeguard the health of the population.

While there is always room for service improvements, let me make it clear that our healthcare system has actually served us very well amidst the COVID-19 pandemic; both the public health and hospital systems have effectively stood up to this unprecedented and daunting test over the past 15 months. Hong Kong is one of the few places in the world in which every COVID-19 patient is being properly cared for, in terms of isolation and treatment, in public hospitals and related facilities. The HA and healthcare workers have worked throughout the pandemic with courage and dedication. For that, you have my heartfelt gratitude and deepest appreciation. And I am confident that, with your continuing commitment, Hong Kong will overcome this pandemic. The question, of course, is when that will be. To a considerable extent, it depends on the people of Hong Kong, on how quickly we can get the great majority to take advantage of our free, community-wide vaccination

programme. I urge everyone to do so, sooner rather than later, in order to protect yourself and your family, and if we are to return to normality.

In the 15 months since the COVID-19 outbreak, like many places in the world, I believe we have learned a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of our healthcare system, and in particular, the direction we must take, the policies and programmes we must implement if we are to respond effectively and efficiently to a future pandemic or other major healthcare challenges. So allow me to share a few of my thoughts on this occasion.

Let me begin with President Xi Jinping's keynote address at the opening ceremony last month of the Boao Forum for Asia's annual conference. In his speech, President Xi called on all countries to defeat the pandemic, and I quote, "through solidarity and co-operation." This is, in my view, first and foremost in defeating the virus.

Disease, after all, does not distinguish among races and peoples. It has no regard for a country's level of development. It observes no boundaries. A virus needs no passport to travel from one place to another. In this 21st century of economic globalisation and unfettered flow of people, we cannot build a wall against disease.

The answer is therefore concerted efforts and co-operation, between governments at the global and regional levels and across different sectors at the local level. In our case, since the first infected case was confirmed in late January 2020, the HKSAR Government set up a high level Steering Committee chaired personally by the Chief Executive which comprises all Principal Officials, as well as the Director of Health and the HA's Chief Executive. An Expert Advisory Panel consisting of four public health and medical experts was appointed from the same day to provide advice and guidance to our work. Other advisory panels were subsequently convened to help the Government to authorise vaccines for emergency use and to examine post-vaccination matters. Co-operation also comes from various universities in research and investigations, from the industrial sector in production of PPEs, from the technology sector in coming up with innovative solutions on medical surveillance and contact tracing, from the elderly care sector in adopting infection control measures in their institutions, from the property management sector in supporting our compulsory testing and enforcement operations. It is therefore very disappointing that contrary to this joint effort approach, some healthcare staff had chosen to politicise anti-epidemic measures and engage in spreading inaccurate information.

My second takeaway is the importance of research and development (R&D) and its application. In this respect, scientists all over the world have not failed us. Within a much compressed timetable for trials and evaluations, we now have vaccines authorised for emergency use which have been hailed as the only way to get humankind out of this unprecedented public health crisis. Given my Government's commitment to innovation and technology, I have attached importance to supporting R&D almost from day one. By now, \$170 million has been allocated from the Food and Health Bureau's Health and Medical Research Fund and another \$350 million set aside by the Research

Grants Council of the University Grants Committee to fund COVID-19 related research. Some of these have already borne fruit. For example, rapid nucleic acid tests for COVID-19 developed by the University of Hong Kong research team are now being used by public healthcare laboratories in more than 70 countries and regions. The University of Hong Kong also picked up a "Gold Medal with Congratulations" at the International Exhibition of Inventions of Geneva for developing the world's first nasal spray vaccine for COVID-19, which is now undergoing clinical trial. An innovative sewage-testing tool for COVID-19 has helped us to monitor the spread of the virus in individual buildings. Based on these sewage findings, the Government has conducted compulsory testing of about 130 buildings identifying more than 50 confirmed cases. What is remarkable is that a significant number of the cases were actually found before there was even a confirmed case in those buildings.

HA has also adopted technology usefully to provide care during the pandemic. There's the mobile application "HA Go", which has piloted telehealth consultation for psychiatric services using video-conferencing technology, while health staff have made rehabilitation exercise videos available to patients through "HA Go". And I know that 5G is now being explored at Tseung Kwan O Hospital for real-time expert consultations and, down the road, even the viewing of complex medical procedures.

My third observation is that with more and more Hong Kong people moving to work and live in the Greater Bay Area Mainland cities, instead of requiring these HA patients to come back to HA hospitals to receive service, which has been impeded by the boundary control measures, innovative arrangements have to be found. Supported by the HA, the Food and Health Bureau has appointed an agent, in this case the University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen Hospital, to take up consultations for HA patients in Guangdong. Up to the middle of April, the Hospital has already conducted some 12 500 consultations involving 7 700 HA patients. This experience will provide useful reference for facilitating people flow in the Greater Bay Area development in future.

Finally, we have to recognise that the COVID-19 pandemic hit us at the time when Hong Kong was still haunted by anti-Central Government and anti-HKSAR Government chaos and violence since June 2019. One painful experience we have had in the fight against COVID-19 is how destructive misinformation could be. Despite that public safety is at stake, a small group of people have repeatedly sought to undermine our anti-epidemic efforts, including distorting the purpose of the universal community testing programme last September or slandering Mainland vaccines. To counter that, my Government has been highly transparent about our anti-epidemic initiatives and programmes, and will continue to promote objective understanding through various means, with a view to restoring and building trust in our community. It is through such trust and professionalism that we will overcome this challenge together.

After we have dealt with COVID-19, we still have much to do to strengthen our public health system to tackle the long term challenges. In recent years, the Government has increased investment into this system to serve the people. For example, a special funding arrangement for the HA has

been put in place to reflect the pressure arising from ageing of the population. As a result, recurrent subvention to the Authority has increased by almost 30 per cent over the past three years, amounting to \$80.7 billion in 2021-22. In addition, through two successive commitments, a total of \$500 billion has been set aside for upgrading and expanding our medical and health facilities. This includes two 10-year Hospital Development Plans which together will provide an additional 15 000 beds, representing an increase of about 50 per cent on top of the existing 29 000 beds in the Authority, and related hospital facilities.

With enhanced hardware, we need to have sufficient manpower. It is no secret that Hong Kong has been facing serious shortage of doctors, especially specialist doctors, and such shortage has resulted in tremendous workload for our existing doctors, especially those in public hospitals, and in long waiting time for patients. Despite an increase in medical student intake into the two local medical schools, we have to accept that this alone will not be able to solve the problem, which is imminent. That is why I announced earlier this year that we will put in place an alternative pathway for the admission of non-locally trained doctors who are Hong Kong permanent residents to serve in public institutions. The bill to amend the Medical Registration Ordinance for this purpose will be ready later this month. And I appeal to our medical fraternity for their support.

Ladies and gentlemen, this year marks the 30th anniversary of the Hospital Authority. I know I speak for the people of Hong Kong when I say that the Authority and its some 84 000 staff have served Hong Kong people well. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Hospital Authority on its continuing achievements, and sincerely hope that through solidarity, co-operation, innovation, technology, communication and the building of trust, we can all look forward to maintaining high quality healthcare for our people.

I wish you all a very rewarding HA Convention, and a year blessed with good health and happiness. Thank you.

