

Speech by Secretary for Health at opening ceremony of 18th Congress of Asian Society of Transplantation (English only) (with photos)

Following is the speech by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, at the opening ceremony of the 18th Congress of Asian Society of Transplantation today (August 25):

Dr Ghazali Ahmad (President of the Asian Society of Transplantation), Dr Maggie Ma (President of the Hong Kong Society of Transplantation), Professor John Fung (President-Elect of The Transplantation Society), distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I stand before you today to mark the opening ceremony of the 18th Congress of Asian Society of Transplantation. As we gather here, embracing a collaborative spirit to advance the field of organ transplantation in Asia, I want to highlight three points.

First of all, on behalf of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government, I want to extend my warmest welcome to all our guests from abroad. I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to the Hong Kong Society of Transplantation and the Asian Society of Transplantation for organising and bringing this event to Hong Kong. This is particularly exciting because the last Congress in 2021 was held as a virtual event due to the COVID-19 epidemic and this is the first time after the control of the epidemic that we can have this valuable opportunity to gather physically for a face-to-face conference. I am sure that you will all make the best use of the Congress to embrace knowledge, and to forge lasting connections. But I would like to encourage each and every one of you to make use of this opportunity to explore the vibrant and dynamic metropolis of Hong Kong and enjoy the beautiful view of the harbour, the world-class shopping, our famous culinary delights and many more.

Secondly, as a transplant surgeon myself, I am proud to say that organ transplantation is a medical marvel that offers a new lease of life to those suffering from end-stage organ failure. I urge everyone to prioritise advancements in research as the field of organ transplant continues to evolve rapidly, pushing the boundaries of what was once deemed impossible. Through our collective efforts in cutting-edge research, we will be able to witness groundbreaking advancements in surgical techniques, donor-recipient matching, transplant immunology, transplant oncology, post-transplant care and many more. These innovations have transformed countless lives and restored hope to individuals and their families. The Congress of Asian Society of Transplantation provides a unique platform for sharing experiences, exchanging ideas, and establishing collaborations to promote innovations. We

have the opportunity to learn from esteemed experts and pioneers in the field in order to explore new avenues for research, refine our clinical practices, and strengthen our ethical and legal frameworks. Together we shape the future of transplantation in Asia.

Finally, as a health official, I call on not only the healthcare professionals but the whole community to address the issue of organ shortage collectively and find sustainable solutions. Despite the significant progress made in organ transplantation, Asia, being the largest and most populous continent, has continued to face this unique challenge. The demand far exceeds the supply, resulting in long waiting lists where people's lives are hanging in the balance.

It is essential for every society to raise awareness about organ donation and encourage individuals to make informed decisions. Education plays a pivotal role in dispelling myths and misconceptions surrounding organ transplantation. We need to emphasise that organ donation is a noble act that saves lives based on altruism and donor autonomy. We also need to improve the infrastructure and legal framework surrounding organ transplantation. This includes developing robust systems for organ procurement and establishing transparent systems for organ allocation. Collaboration among healthcare professionals, policymakers and the public is crucial.

I want to take this opportunity to share with you a unique experience with collaboration across a boundary in a miraculous heart transplant that saved the life of a 4-month-old baby. Last December, a then 4-month-old baby girl in Hong Kong, Tsz-hei, suffered from progressive heart failure due to dilated cardiomyopathy and needed a heart transplant to survive. As you can imagine, it would be literally impossible to find an infant donor heart that is suitable for her given the small donor pool in Hong Kong. For the first time, the Government of the HKSAR sought assistance from the Central Government and the National Health Commission. An emergency response plan was immediately formulated through collaboration between the China Organ Transplant Response System and the HKSAR. Miraculously, on December 16, a heart from a brain-dead infant donor of compatible size and blood group was available in Guangdong and there was no suitable local recipient. An unprecedented special arrangement was made to transport the organ to Hong Kong for a successful transplantation to Tsz-hei. Thanks to the benevolence of the donor's parents and the collaborative effort of the Mainland and local authorities and healthcare professionals, she recovered very well. Last month, I visited her on her first birthday and it was a most heartening moment.

Tsz-hei sets the record as the youngest patient undergoing a heart transplant in Hong Kong. More importantly, she is also the very first case of cross-boundary transplantation between the Mainland and Hong Kong. The collaboration has fully demonstrated the importance of organ sharing and manifested the shared principle of putting peoples' lives first in both our motherland and Hong Kong with considerable social and medical impact.

The success also bears testament to the remarkable progress and

achievements that have been made in organ donation and transplantation in Mainland China in recent years. Since the promulgation of the nationwide ban on using organs from executed prisoners on January 1, 2015, the Mainland China has been committed to promoting voluntary organ donation from citizens as the sole legal source of donor organs. The China Organ Transplant Response System established a robust and transparent system for organ procurement and allocation, as well as monitoring and quality assurance in transplant services. As a result, the number of organ donations and transplantations in China has grown rapidly, currently ranking first in Asia and second in the world in the number of organ transplantation. In 2022, even with the COVID-19 epidemic, there were 5 628 cadaveric organ donors, and nearly 18 000 cases of organ transplantation in total.

Taking reference from the successful experience of Tsz-hei's case, the HKSAR is actively exploring the setting-up of a standing second-tier mutual assistance mechanism for organ transplant with the Mainland. The mechanism will allow donated organs in Hong Kong and the Mainland to be better utilised when no suitable recipients can be identified in the respective place, thus maximising the utility to achieve the biggest benefit. We set an example for regional collaboration in saving the first patient and now we are in the process of creating a system to rescue more.

All lives are priceless and equally precious. By fostering a deeper understanding of organ donation and transplantation within our communities, we can dispel myths, eliminate misconceptions and disinformation, and inspire more individuals to join the forces of organ donors.

In closing, ladies and gentlemen, the opening of the 18th Congress of Asian Society of Transplantation marks a pivotal moment in our collective pursuit to advance the field of transplantation. May this Congress be a resounding success and I wish everyone a most rewarding and enjoyable stay in Hong Kong. Thank you.

