

Urge the Government to Improve Medical Policies and Services for Children

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I. Introduction

Hong Kong's medical system, with its advanced medical facilities and professional medical and nursing staff, provides the public with quality medical services. In hospitals, there are specialties providing quick and easy service to the public.

But the Government has neglected the needs of children: a comprehensive child health policy and health services have yet to be developed. If children are to grow up healthily, they must have a healthy childhood. Although children enjoy a lot of attention in today's society, their health needs are often overlooked. The deficient child health policy has resulted in a lack of coordination in service provision, thus affecting the efficiency of the services themselves.

Health services should cover both the physical and the psychological dimensions. Where the physical dimensions are concerned, the Government is responsible for providing children with medical and health care services such as infant check-up, vaccination, student health care and dental care so that children can grow healthily. Equally important are the psychological dimensions. Though children in general do not have mental problems, they should undergo psychological tests and assessment regularly so that problems can be detected as soon as they occur, and psychologists and social workers can follow up on those cases before it is too late.

The UK and China both being signatories to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Convention applies to Hong Kong too. Article 24 of the UNCRC reads, "*States parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.*" This means that children should be given the best health and medical protection and that the Government should attach importance to medical and health care services for children.

Children being the future pillars of society, the Government should take good care of them. In Hong Kong's current child health policy, there are many deficiencies which may affect children's physical and mental growth. For the future of our country and for the good of the next generation, the Government must revise its child health policy.

We hope to draw the attention of the Government and the public to this issue with the following motion.

II. Child Medical Services in Hong Kong

At present, the government units responsible for medical services in Hong Kong are mainly the Hospital Authority, the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, and the Department of Health under the Bureau.

The Department of Health provides children with the following services: student health services, maternal and child health services, child assessment services, and school dental care services.

1. Student Health Service

- The unit provides a comprehensive range of promotive and preventive services for primary and secondary school students according to their needs at various stages of their development.
- The Student Health Service scheme is aimed at promoting and maintaining the physical and mental health of students.
- The scheme is aimed at year-one primary school students to form-seven secondary school students.

- Participation in the scheme is voluntary.
- Annual booking is free of charge.
- By promoting and maintaining the physical and mental health of students, the scheme helps them realize their full potentials in their studies.
- Hong Kong has a total of 12 Health Service Centers and three Special Assessment Centers.

Services include:

- conducting physical examination and health assessment;
- providing individual counseling and health education activities; and
- referring students with problems to the Special Assessment Centers or appropriate specialties for further management.

Statistics:

- 2001/02: target figure: 950,000
participant figure: 501,589
participation rate: 52.8%
- Referrals: 70,000 were referred to the Special Assessment Centers under the Department of Health for follow-ups;
Another 10,000 were referred to the specialty clinics under the Hospital Authority;
No data for those who come of themselves for follow-up consultations.
- Promotion: Letters are sent to the parents of primary and secondary school students, and mass media are involved.
Regular publication of *Colorful Bridge*, which is also uploaded onto the Internet.

2. Family Health Service

The unit offers family planning and maternal and child health services. It provides a comprehensive range of health services for women of childbearing ages and children from birth to 5 years old. Hong Kong has a total of 50 maternal and child health centers providing child health services and maternal health services.

3. Child Assessment Service

The unit attends to children with developmental problems. From birth to 12 years of age, such children can receive a range of services including diagnostic tests and assessment of body functions; developmental guidance, counseling and support for parents; and referral of children and parents to appropriate agencies for medical, developmental, educational and social services.

4. Dental Service

The unit provides a range of promotive, preventive and curative services to the community.

Services include:

- the oral health education team promotes oral health awareness and oral hygiene practices and facilitate the proper use of oral health care services;
- the School Dental Care Service provides basic and preventive dental care to primary school children;
- government dental clinics provide emergency services to the public and comprehensive dental services to civil servants and their dependants; and
- the oral maxillofacial surgery and dental teams provide specialist and emergency dental services to hospital and referral patients including patient groups with special oral health care needs.

(Source: Website of the Department of Health, http://www.info.gov.hk/dh/main_ser/index.htm, and reply from the Student Health Service, Department of Health, up to 24 February 2003)

5. Pediatric Wards in Hong Kong

5.1 Survey on the Charter for Children in Hospital

In 1998 the Hong Kong Committee on Children's Rights formulated a Charter for Children in Hospital, which is based on the UK Charter for Children formed to meet the special needs of child patients. From August to November in 2001, the Committee conducted a questionnaire survey on the Charter for Children in Hospital, which had been adopted by the pediatric wards in public hospitals. The survey aimed to find out the extent to which the Charter had been implemented. Volunteers of the job visited the pediatric wards in 6 public hospitals and surveyed ward in-charges, other medical and nursing staff, patients from the age of 6 to 11, and parents whose children had stayed in hospital for two days or more.

In the survey, 42 child patients, 67 parents, 5 ward in-charges and 39 other medical and nursing staff were interviewed. Although most of the ward in-charges believed they had provided the services stipulated in the Charter, figures show that there are some hospitals where adult patients and child patients still have to share the same wards, there are also some hospitals which still do not allow child patients to wear their own clothes, or which have yet to provide hospital play services. Therefore, facilities for child patients and parents should be improved and staff training should be strengthened.

Many suggestions were provided by the medical and nursing staff on how to improve services and reduce children's need for hospitalization. Although most of the medical and nursing staff believed they understood the special needs of child patients, training in this aspect has not been included in the pediatric courses.

Most of the child patients interviewed understood what diseases they were suffering. Their condition and the procedures for their treatment had also been explained to them, but they did not really understand the explanations. Most of them had their families with them. On the whole, 55% of the child patients were satisfied with their experience in hospital, and 69% of the parents were satisfied or very satisfied with the hospital services. The parents also made many suggestions on improving space utilization, facilities and procedures in hospitals.

5.2 Survey on Child Medical Policy and Service in Hong Kong

We have conducted a questionnaire survey concerning the motion in February 2003. The survey has several objectives: to investigate how thoroughly parents and students now are aware of the child medical services and the child health policy, the extent to which they are using these services, and their opinions on them. Questionnaires were distributed to the students of 3 secondary schools and 3 primary schools, as well as the parents of these students. 547 questionnaires were received from the parents, 363 from primary school students, and 253 from secondary school students. Some of the data and opinions collected from the survey have been incorporated into this motion.

III. Deficiencies in Hong Kong's Child Health Policy and Services

1. Student Health Service

The Student Health Service scheme is the next guardian of children's health after the maternal and child health centers. Naturally, the public are concerned about its quality and the scope of its assessment. According to the results of our questionnaire survey, its assessment has not taken enough account of the physical and mental growth of children. Among the parents interviewed, only 35% thought that the scheme could detect children's psychological problems; as for the detection of mental problems and emotional problems, the figures are 31% and 35% respectively. These figures show that the scheme should be improved. At present, the services include only height and weight measurement, visual assessment, body check-up and psychological assessment. Moreover, they are not mandatory. As a result, the scheme cannot provide a comprehensive protection of children's health, nor can

resources be fully utilized. In addition, as there is little communication between those in charge of psychological assessment and the schools, the schools find it difficult to follow up and this seriously weakens the function of the scheme. Furthermore, according to the reply from the Student Health Service, in 2001-02 only 52.8% of eligible students participated in the scheme. Our survey results show that some of the parents interviewed did not let their children participate in the scheme again, and 52.9% of them did so because the assessment was not comprehensive. The Government therefore must conduct a review of the scheme.

2. School Dental Care Service

The scheme is not extensive enough to cover secondary school students. The parents and students interviewed expressed the hope that the scheme would be extended to secondary schools so that students who had financial or other difficulties could enjoy dental services too. According to the UNCRC, “*a child means every human being below the age of 18 years.*” Therefore, the Government’s child medical services should cover students from kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools. As a result of the exclusion of secondary school students from the scheme, oral health has been neglected by some parents and students. This defeats the purpose of what basically is a very effective dental care scheme.

3. Promotion

According to our survey results, a high percentage of primary and secondary school students and their parents did not know much about the medical services available to children. Among the 363 primary school students interviewed, 56% said that they did not know what are the medical services children could enjoy; among the 253 secondary school students interviewed, 40% expressed the same ignorance. Secondary school students are the future intellectuals in Hong Kong, yet 40% of them do not have any basic knowledge about child medical services. This situation must be improved. Among the 547 parents interviewed, only 39% expressed the view that promotional work by the Government could give them a good understanding of child medical services. Furthermore, the Government has never opened a file on child health policy. That is why we, as children, find it difficult to obtain related information. Clearly, there is not enough promotion to help the public get a good understanding of child health policy and services, or to obtain information on such matters.

4. Pediatric Wards

In Hong Kong, there is not enough space in the pediatric wards for parents to stay and keep their children company. In 2002 the Hong Kong Committee on Children’s Rights compiled a report entitled *Questionnaire Survey on the Charter for Children in Hospital*, which contains the opinions of parents, child patients and medical and nursing staff on pediatric wards. It points out that pediatric wards in fact should serve not only child patients but also their parents and friends who come to visit them, and that the patients themselves need a lot of space. These needs can hardly be met by the existing facilities. At present, there are only 16 public hospitals in Hong Kong with pediatric wards. Worse, some public hospitals still put children and adult patients in the same wards. Therefore, space allocation and facilities must be improved, and the Government should discuss this with the hospitals and conduct a review. Some of the children approaching the age of 18 are often treated as adults and assigned to adult wards. This is a violation of the UNCRC principle that children are entitled to special care and help. In the pediatric wards, play specialists can help children relax through games, and reduce the psychological impact of their illnesses. They can also help to eliminate children’s resistance to medical and nursing staff and speed up the progress of their treatment. There are, however, only two hospitals in Hong Kong which have play specialists, and they are volunteers from the Playright Children’s Play Association. It is strange that play services have not been introduced more widely into the hospitals in Hong Kong, even though they are all equipped with advanced medical facilities.

5. Pediatric Hospitals

To date, there is no pediatric hospital in Hong Kong which is dedicated exclusively to providing

prevention, assessment, diagnosis, treatment, hospitalisation and rehabilitation services for children. As a result, there are no one-stop integrated services and the medical histories of child patients cannot be centralized. In contrast, there are already pediatric hospitals in countries like the US, the UK and Canada. In Mainland China, there are quite a few places – for example, Guangzhou, Tianjin and Beijing – which have pediatric hospitals offering comprehensive child medical services.

Take, for example, the Beijing Children's Hospital. A comprehensive range of services is provided by various departments, including municipal key departments, the department of internal medicine, the department of surgery, the department of traditional Chinese medicine, the department of otorhinolaryngology, the department of ophthalmology, the department of stomatology, the department of dermatology, the department of health, the department of nursing and sub-departments under the department of function. Under the department of internal medicine, there are various sub-specialty departments in endocrinology, cardiovascular, neonatology, respiratory physiology, nephrology, neurology to connective tissue, tuberculosis, gastroenterology and infectious diseases, all of which provide services exclusively for children. These sub-specialties are also available in the hospitals in Hong Kong, but they are not all provided within one single hospital that aims to serve children exclusively. What is more, a Consultation Centre for Child Diseases has been set up in the Beijing Children's Hospital to provide diagnosis to both outpatients and in-patients who have not recovered from their illness after several consultations. Over 200 professors with clinical expertise in various specialties provide group consultation services in the hospital.

(Source: Website of the Beijing Children's Hospital, www.bch.com.cn)

In Hong Kong, however, there are pediatric wards in only 16 public hospitals. The facilities are not entirely satisfactory and sub-specialty services are limited.

6. Health Policy

The Government's policy on child medical services is lacking in focus, and the measures for implementation are haphazard and far from comprehensive. This results in a lack of coordination and the services are thus rendered even less effective. The last document that touched upon child health policy in Hong Kong was announced in 1978. After years of changes and progress in society, the child health policy needs to be revised and up-dated. In fact, the Government has never announced any official child health policy. Existing child services are all listed in the documents of separate departments. It seems to us that the Government has yet to set up an efficient department with the power to formulate an overall health policy for children so that children's medical benefit can be protected and their healthy physical and mental growth ensured. Furthermore, the Government does not treat children as individuals with special needs of their own, and that is what is wrong with Hong Kong's child services. According to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, "*the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, ... before as well as after birth.*" Children are different from adults, the Government must take care of them in a different manner.

IV. Suggestions for Hong Kong's Child Health Policy and Services

In view of the deficiencies in the health policy and health services mentioned above, we wish to make the following suggestions:

1. Improve the Quality of the Student Health Service

Mental and emotional problems often disturb the people of Hong Kong and these problems have been troubling the children as well. The psychological development of children is therefore an issue that deserves serious attention. A survey we have conducted indicates that parents generally think that the Student Health Service scheme does not provide sufficient assessment of children's psychological problems. We hope, therefore, that the government departments concerned would enhance the scheme

by setting up a more effective mechanism for psychological assessment. To enable students with psychological problems to seek help from their teachers, it is advisable to send the assessment reports to the schools so that the teachers could take follow-up actions. Furthermore, according to the reply from the Student Health Service of the Department of Health, the number of students who participated in the scheme in the previous school year was just a little more than half of the eligible students in Hong Kong. Our survey also shows that some parents left the scheme because the assessment provided was not comprehensive enough. All these prove that there are deficiencies in the scheme. The Government should improve the quality of the scheme so as to encourage more students to take part in it and to ensure that their health is protected.

2. Extend the School Dental Care Service

According to the UNCRC, “*a child means every human being below the age of 18 years*”. However, the current School Dental Care Service is only available to primary six students and below, and this has aroused the discontent of many secondary school students and their parents. We urge the Government to extend the scheme to the secondary level and enhance its quality to allow more children to enjoy these services and to ensure that their overall health is protected.

3. Strengthen Education and Promotional Work on the Child Health Policy

Due to inadequate education of the public by the Government on the child health policy, and insufficient promotional work, both students and parents do not know much about the policy and the medical services available to students. As students are the beneficiaries of the child medical services, their ignorance shows clearly that the Government has not done enough to education them on their rights. The Government is also not doing enough to promote its policy on child health since the parents who take care of the children are fairly ignorant, too, about the child medical services and child health policy. To tackle this problem, we would like to propose two solutions. First, we suggest that topics on child medical services and general health care should be taught at school assemblies and classes on General Education. Surveys could be conducted among students from time to time to gain a better understanding of their knowledge in these aspects. Second, the Government could strengthen the promotion of child health care and child medical services through the mass media, government publications and regional campaigns so as to draw the attention of parents and encourage greater participation. The measures just suggested not only can safeguard children’s health, but also make sure that government resources allocated to child medical services will not be wasted.

4. Give Pediatric Wards More Space and Improve the Services

Sick children are often very active and lively even though they are not well. They need plenty of activity space. Besides, in order to alleviate their anxiety about staying in hospital, their parents would try to spend as much time with them in the hospital as they can. Right now, however, the pediatric wards are often crowded, thus causing a lot of inconvenience to both the child patients and their relatives visiting them at the hospital. The pediatric wards are just too small for the children to play around. According to Article 10 of the Charter for Children in Hospital, “children shall have the opportunity for play, recreation and education suited to their age and condition”. Article 2 of the Charter also stipulates that “children in hospital shall be able to have their parents with them at all times, provided this is in the child’s best interests. Accommodation shall be offered to all parents whenever possible and they should be helped and encouraged to stay.”

At present, no hospital in Hong Kong provides accommodation service for parents of child patients. We hope that the Government would allocate more resources to pediatric wards so that more space could be created. Furthermore, parents always spend a long period of time at the hospital with their child, but no pediatric wards offer live-in accommodation service for them. The Hong Kong Ronald McDonald House, run by Ronald McDonald House Charities Hong Kong Limited, is the only hospital in Hong Kong that provides such a service. Located near the Prince of Wales Hospital, the House offers lodging facilities to parents whose children are ill and have to stay in hospital.

(Source: Website of the Hong Kong Ronald McDonald House, www.rmh.org.hk/index.asp)

The Government can follow its steps and furnish pediatric wards with live-in facilities for parents. According to our survey, beds in pediatric wards and the attitude of medical and nursing staff are also areas for improvement. Furthermore, not all the staff working in pediatric wards have received training on handling children's problems, and there is as yet no play specialist to help the child patients in public hospitals. Children, in our opinion, should be taken care of by medical and nursing staff who have received proper training on children and who understand their needs. Play specialists can lift the spirit of the children and help them at every stage of their treatment. Regarding the current practice of admitting children close to 18 years old to adult wards, the Government could learn from the experience of foreign countries and put children of similar age group in adjoining beds so as to minimize the age difference of the pediatric wards.

5. Set Up Pediatric Hospitals

Pediatric hospitals are hospitals that serve children exclusively and provide one-stop integrated medical services for them. They have already been introduced into the US and Mainland China. Child medical services in Hong Kong are loosely coordinated, and there is no systematic and centralized monitoring of the facilities and quality of the service. In Hong Kong, the number of children in the age group below 15 years of age is 1,094,400, and this amounts to 16.1% of the entire population. If a pediatric hospital is established in Hong Kong, all the current problems relating to child medical services can be dealt with much faster. According to our survey, over 80% of the respondents support the setting up of a pediatric hospital. The pediatric hospital can provide one-stop integrated child medical services, and with all the diagnoses carried out in one single hospital, the medical histories of children can be centralized rather than kept in different hospitals. Various sub-specialties in pediatrics can also be set up in the hospital. Health care services ranging from those provided by the Maternal and Child Health Centers to child health care will all be available in this hospital. The health condition of children can be recorded in detail for future reference. Resources for child medical services can also be re-deployed and re-allocated. Children will be taken care of by professionals and trained medical and nursing staff on the wards. In this hospital, the wards will be tailor-made for both child patients and their parents. All these improvements will certainly help tackle the health problems of children more efficiently.

6. Improve and formulate an Overall Child Health Policy in Hong Kong

The child health policy in Hong Kong has not been revised for many years and is therefore not up to date. In fact, the Government has never announced any official child health policy. At present, the data on child medical services are filed separately by the various government departments in charge of those services, and are therefore scattered and disorganized. According to our survey, nearly 80% of the parents interviewed agree that the Government should formulate a proper child health policy and provide child medical services on a comprehensive and systematic basis. In any case, there can be little doubt that the existing policy and services are deficient and should be improved, as can be seen in a number of ways: both the students and their parents are not fully aware of the child health policy and the child medical services; the participation rate in the Student Health Service scheme in the last school year was just a little over 50%; assessment of children's psychological and emotional problems – a part of the Service – is limited in scope; and facilities in pediatric wards are inadequate. Therefore, it is necessary for the government to set up a department to formulate an official child health policy and to oversee its implementation. More importantly, the Government should put into practice the spirit of respect for children set out in the UNCRC, treat them as a unique group with special needs of their own, and let this guide her in the formulation of a child health policy as well as in the re-organization of the services which are currently not being well coordinated. The Government should act now to systemize the services and establish a mechanism for enquires, spell out the policy in detail, and work on it step by step. Our Government should fulfill the responsibilities of a signatory and protect Hong Kong children's right to medical services.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, in the absence of a comprehensive and integrated child health policy, medical services for children in Hong Kong now are disorganized and fragmentary; they are not sufficiently coordinated to address fully the needs of the children, and hence their efficiency is weakened. Take, for example, the Student Health Service scheme. Since participation is not mandatory and since the body check-up provided is very basic and perfunctory, there is no guarantee that the children will receive the health protection to which they are entitled. The School Dental Care Service scheme is another example. Not all the children under the age of 18 are covered as secondary school students are not eligible for this service. Doesn't this contradict the recent and intensive government campaign to promote oral health for life? How can the campaign be successful when even protection for children is insufficient?

Furthermore, when we did our research on this topic, we found that it was very difficult to collect information on child medical services in Hong Kong. The reason is that the Government has not built up a database on child medical services. According to the results of our survey, only a small percentage of people know what medical services are provided by the Government for the children in Hong Kong. This proves that promotion on child medical and health care services is inadequate. How could the children know what medical protection they are entitled to if the Government herself does not have a complete database on child medical services? This would certainly affect the benefits to be enjoyed by children. At present, there are no government departments responsible for formulating and coordinating the overall child health policy, and also overseeing the welfare of children and their physical and mental development. For example, unlike countries such as the US, the UK, Canada and Mainland China, we do not have a pediatric hospital in Hong Kong to provide children with one-stop services such as vaccination, assessment, diagnosis, treatment, hospitalization, and rehabilitation. What we have in Hong Kong are small pediatric wards, and just a limited number of sub-specialties in pediatrics in the hospitals.

Therefore, we urge the Government to improve, as soon as possible, the Student Health Service scheme, the School Dental Care Service scheme, and the quality of pediatric wards. Promotion should be strengthened, an overall child health policy should be formulated, and pediatric hospitals should be set up. Only then will children enjoy an all-round and healthy development, both mentally and psychologically.

A healthy childhood makes a healthy and accomplished adult, and plays a part in the building of a healthy, prosperous and productive society. Children are the future and hopes of a society. Their physical and mental health deserves the attention of all people. However, the current health policy in Hong Kong cannot meet the health needs of children at various stages of their development. Thus, it is essential to act and improve the situation in order to create a healthier environment for children to develop, and to safeguard the sustainability and the development of society.

We, students from Queen Elizabeth School, Wong Shiu Chi Secondary School and two Child Ambassadors, move the motion **“Urge the Government to improve medical policies and services for children”** be passed.

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The website of the Hospital Authority: <http://www.ha.org.hk/hesd/nsapi>

Reply from the Student Health Service of Department of Health

Reply from the Hospital Authority Head Office

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