Quality Health Care for an Ageing Population
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World-class health care services
The healthcare system in Hong Kong is among the best in the world as it is accessible and equitable, thereby providing comprehensive protection for the needy and the underprivileged. It is evident considering the low infant mortality rate and high life expectancy rate. With reference to statistics released in 2005 by the World Health Organization, the life expectancy of babies born in Hong Kong was among the longest in the world. Such figure was comparable to that of Japan, which is renowned for longevity, and was higher than that of many European countries.

Notwithstanding the quality health care services, the rapidly ageing population poses enormous challenges to the current system. This article will briefly outline the challenges and present long-term solutions to this pressing issue.

Challenge: the ageing population
In accordance with the Hong Kong Population Projections 2007, the population remains on an ageing trend, revealed by the ever-increasing median age from 39.6 in 2006 to 46.1 in 2036. In the coming twenty years, the ratio of adult population to elderly population will dwindle drastically from 6:1 to 3:1; imposing an unbearable healthcare burden on future generations (See Figures 1 and 2 below).

Demographic Structure -Current

The challenges faced are clear and imminent: the ageing population implies that the demand for healthcare services and medical costs would be on a rapid and consistent rise with the immense number of senior citizens. The public health expenditure is expected to rise from $38 billion in 2004 to $127 billion in 2025.

Fig. 1: Current demographic structure of Hong Kong. Adapted from: Food and Health Bureau, HKSAR Government
Root issue: Sustainability

To cope with the growing needs of the ageing population, we need to guarantee the sustainable development of healthcare system. We must eradicate the structural weaknesses in the existing system and combat the problem through long-run measures.

Solution 1: Repositioning public healthcare services

All the time the healthcare system has laid much emphasis on hospital-oriented and curative-focused services. As the old saying goes, “Prevention is better than cure”. There is an urgent need for reforming and repositioning the public healthcare service with the aim of offering more holistic primary and preventive care services which attach more importance to bettering health on the long-run instead of curing illnesses. For instance, with a view to address chronic diseases in light of the ageing population, future hospitalization rate and need for in-patients services among senior citizens could be reduced.

It is of utmost importance to enhance health promotion and education in order to arouse public awareness of preventive care for chronic diseases. In particular, various government bureaus including Food and Health Bureau and Education Bureau should collaborate with each other in placing more resources on health assessment, wellness promotion, and healthy lifestyle promotion. Regular seminars and exhibitions regarding health promotion and disease prevention would be an effective way to achieve this purpose in community. Financial subsidies could also be provided by government to chronic disease patients and the elderly on expenses of disease prevention including health checks and vaccinations as a way to address the ageing population.

Solution 2: Promoting public-private partnership in healthcare services

The current public sector is stretched to the limit while the private sector is not fully utilized considering the great difference in waiting time. In light of significant public-private imbalance in healthcare system, continued growth in service demand could lead to deterioration of service quality and lengthening of waiting time of the highly-subsidized public healthcare services. In order to encourage
utilization of private sector, vouchers which are partial subsidies for recipients in using private healthcare services could be used to relieve the long queues for public services. It also offers the public with diversified choices of healthcare providers. In particular, amount of subsides under the current Elderly Healthcare Voucher Pilot Scheme should be raised to $500 per year with a lowering of age limit to 65, allowing more senior citizens to receive healthcare from the private sector.

The government should foster public-private partnership through means of purchasing primary care services from the private sector by the public sector for underprivileged and senior citizens, thereby diminishing the workload of out-patient clinics. Such policy formulation would promote competition between two sectors and enhance efficiency by cost-effective measures in the long run through purchasing services at a lower cost under bulk contracts. Also, part of the public service demand is met making use of the private sector's capacity.

Conclusion

In view of the ageing population that would pose immense threat on the healthcare services in Hong Kong, long-term actions must be taken promptly. It demands joint efforts from a responsible government and cooperation of the public and private sectors to ensure the long-term sustainability of healthcare system.

References: