

LCQ11: Overseas-trained physiotherapists and occupational therapists

Following is a question by the Hon David Lam and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (April 2):

Question:

Some professional bodies for physiotherapy and occupational therapy in Hong Kong have indicated that it takes at least eight months for Hong Kong physiotherapists and occupational therapists who graduated overseas (overseas-trained therapists) to complete their registration applications in Hong Kong. It is learnt that there are quite a number of overseas-trained therapists awaiting assessment and approval for registration. Some of these therapists have been interviewed by the Hospital Authority (HA) while awaiting registration, but have been placed on a waiting list due to their unresolved registration status. Meanwhile, some overseas-trained therapists have worked as ward assistants, or taken up temporary positions as student physiotherapists or student occupational therapists. There are views that while the registration procedures must be rigorous, the excessively long waiting times for registration are unfair to applicants and prevent them from fully utilising their expertise to serve members of the public. As a result, some applicants have even left Hong Kong to serve in the countries where they graduated. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the following information regarding the time taken for overseas-trained physiotherapists and occupational therapists who meet the eligibility for registration to register in Hong Kong: the 10th percentile time, the 90th percentile time and the median time;
- (2) whether the Physiotherapists Board and the Occupational Therapists Board have established performance indicators or performance pledges for registration processing times; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;
- (3) of the number of overseas-trained therapists who applied for registration in Hong Kong and the rate of successful registration in each of the past three years, and whether it has compiled statistics on the number of those who left Hong Kong before completing their registration; and
- (4) whether the Government will urge the Physiotherapists Board and the Occupational Therapists Board to expedite the vetting and approval of registration applications, so as to encourage overseas-trained therapists to return to Hong Kong to serve therein; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Secretariat of the Supplementary Medical Professions Council (the Council), my consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon David Lam is as follows:

Healthcare professions in Hong Kong observe the principle of professional autonomy. Their statutory boards and councils were established by legislations. They are responsible for the registration of professionals, and maintaining and uplifting professional standard and conduct. Under the Supplementary Medical Professions Ordinance (the Ordinance), the Council and the Boards of each supplementary medical profession (SMP) are responsible for handling the registration, disciplinary and other regulatory matters of supplementary medical professionals.

Under section 12(1)(b) of the Ordinance, the Council may recognise the professional qualifications of non-locally trained supplementary medical professionals for meeting the requirement for local registration. When considering whether individual applicants are qualified for local registration, the Council will consider the applicants' education, training, professional experience and skillset, and consult the relevant Board of the SMPs. The processing time required for individual applications depends on a host of factors, including the discussions and views of the Council and the relevant Board on whether to recognise the qualification and experience of the applicant, and whether the training institute or regulatory authority of the region where the applicant comes from can timely provide information or verify information submitted by the applicant. Upon receiving the complete application and required documents, the Council could generally complete processing the application for registration in around three months' time.

Registration as a healthcare professional is a serious process to ensure the academic and clinical competency of the overall healthcare profession and protect patient safety. Given the unique circumstances of each application, their processing time will vary, making it difficult to prescribe a timeframe to complete the processing of applications. The Secretariat will maintain communication with the applicant to inform them timely of the progress of the application and/or any supplementary information required. The general situation of applications of non-locally trained physiotherapists and occupational therapists in the past three years is set out at Annex. The overall average processing time of these cases is 3.5 months and the 90th percentile is 6.0 months, rather than "at least 8 months" as mentioned in the question.

Department of Health (DH) will continue to streamline administrative procedures and enhance the use of information technology to more effectively support the boards and councils in discharging their duties, including handling registration-related matters. For example, DH will introduce e-forms for registration of supplementary medical professionals as an enhancement

measure in the second half of this year, with a view to expanding to other healthcare professions.