

## LCQ4: Manpower of dentists

Following is a question by the Hon Michael Tien and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (April 24):

Question:

In a discussion paper on "Proposed Amendments to the Dentists Registration Ordinance (Cap. 156)" submitted on July 14 last year to the Panel on Health Services of this Council, the Government pointed out that Hong Kong had been facing a shortage of dentists, with only approximately 0.37 dentists per 1 000 population as at end 2022, lagging behind other countries; and according to the manpower projections for healthcare professionals conducted by the Government in 2020, the shortage of dentists in Hong Kong might persist till 2035. The Government indicated in January this year that it would introduce the amendment bill to the Dentists Registration Ordinance (Cap. 156) into this Council in the first half of this year to provide new pathways for admission of qualified non-locally trained dentists for serving in specified institutions. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the long-term target number set for locally trained dentists;
- (2) whether it has assessed the numbers of dentists per 1 000 population in Hong Kong in 2035, 2040 and 2045; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and
- (3) given that the Faculty of Dentistry at the University of Hong Kong is currently the only institution in Hong Kong that provides Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme, whether the Government has considered establishing a new dental school to increase the manpower of local dentists in the long run; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In response to the various parts of the Member's question, the consolidated reply are as follows:

The Government's policy objective in healthcare manpower is to ensure a stable supply of healthcare manpower to meet the expected demand for healthcare services in Hong Kong. The Government carries out healthcare manpower projection on a triennial basis to project the manpower need required to fulfil service demands. The Government assesses the manpower target of different healthcare professions based on the projection result, rather than solely considering the healthcare profession to population ratio.

Dentists' manpower

For dentists, Hong Kong has a total of 2 876 registered dentists as at end December 2023. The dentist per 1 000 population is around 0.37. According to the Healthcare Manpower Projection 2020, the shortfall of dentist manpower was projected to be 115 and 102 in 2030 and 2035 respectively. The shortfall was expected to persist until 2040 before easing slightly. To increase dentist manpower, the Government increased the number of University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded first-year-first-degree places of the Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme on four occasions. The number increased from 50 in the 2009/10 academic year to 90 in the 2024/25 academic year, representing an increase of 80 per cent.

#### Enhancing manpower resources for dental profession

To safeguard the oral health of the public, the Government established the Working Group on Oral Health and Dental Care (the Working Group) in end 2022 to review the policy objectives, implementation strategies, service scopes and delivery models of oral health and dental care. The Working Group released an interim report in December 2023, recommending the Government to develop primary dental care services appropriate for different age groups by focusing on prevention of dental diseases, making use of the capacity of ancillary dental workers to complement to overall development need of primary dental care services. Another recommendation is to strengthen manpower supply of dental professionals. Specific measures include providing new pathways for admitting qualified non-locally trained dentists to alleviate their shortage, and enhancing training for ancillary dental workers to enable them to take on a greater role in primary dental care services.

To complement the development of oral health and dental care, the Government must take necessary measures to alleviate the existing manpower shortage of dental professions. Given the lead time required for training local dentists, as well as the practical constraints in expanding the teaching manpower and facilities, the Government cannot solely rely on increasing the number of local training places to address the imminent manpower shortage, particularly the acute shortage of dentists in the public sector. The Government introduced the Dentists Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024 (the Bill) into the Legislative Council to provide new pathways for the admission of qualified non-locally trained dentists to practise in specified institutions under the premise that the professional standards and patients' welfare are maintained.

At the same time, based on the risk-based principle, the Bill also suitably adjusts the areas of practice of ancillary dental workers, and introduces a statutory registration regime for both dental hygienists and dental therapists under the regulatory control of the Dental Council of Hong Kong (DCHK) while retitling ancillary dental workers as dental care professionals, with a view to recognising their professional status and ensuring patients' safety and service quality. According to information from the DCHK and the Department of Health (DH), there are a total of 613 registered dental hygienists and 237 dental therapists employed by Government as at February 2024. To enhance training for local ancillary dental workers, the training places of dental hygienists and dental therapists will be increased by the Government to nearly double from 95 in the 2023/24 academic

year to 185 in the 2024/25 academic year. The DH will provide full tuition sponsorship to students studying the dental hygienist and dental therapist programmes starting from 2023/24 academic year in order to attract more individuals to join the industry.

The Health Bureau has earlier launched a new round of healthcare manpower projection to tie in with the planning exercise for the 2025-28 triennium of the UGC. Subject to the projection results, the Government will review the strategies for local healthcare manpower development and consider the need to further adjust the number of healthcare training places in the next triennium of UGC, as well as exploring long-term measures for the training of healthcare professionals. The Government currently has no plan to set up a second dental school, which involves important policy considerations and substantial funding, while not being able to alleviate the shortage of dentists within a short period of time.

The Government will continue to keep in view the community's demand for dental care services and manpower situation of the profession, and suitably adjust the strategy to ensure the supply of dentists and ancillary dental workers, including the regular planning of training places based on manpower projection.