

LCQ8: Non-emergency ambulance transfer service

Following is a question by the Hon Lam Chun-sing and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (June 28):

Question:

There are views pointing out that the number of person-times using the non-emergency ambulance transfer service (NEATS) of the Hospital Authority (HA) has been on the rise in recent years. Non-emergency ambulances often transport multiple patients at the same time, which, coupled with the difficulties in parking encountered in some places, has caused some patients to suffer waiting for several hours before they can reach their destinations. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) whether it knows the average number of persons transported by HA's NEATS in each of the past five years, with a breakdown by the type of patients transported (e.g. patients living at home, in residential care homes for the elderly and in residential care homes for persons with disabilities) and hospital cluster;

(2) whether it knows the (i) staffing establishment, (ii) strength, (iii) wastage rate and (iv) number of new recruits of NEATS attendants in various hospital clusters in each of the past five years;

(3) as it is learnt that non-emergency ambulances often encounter difficulties when entering public or private housing estates and private car parks (including places under the management of the Housing Department (HD) and the Link Real Estate Investment Trust (Link REIT)), including being requested to park at loading areas and spending long time paying parking fees, etc, thus affecting the quality of transport service, whether the Government will enhance communication and co-ordination with the HD and the Link REIT, and study turning non-emergency ambulances to special purpose vehicles, so as to facilitate the transport of patients and speed up the transport; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that; and

(4) as there are views that the ageing of the population and the development of quite a number of new areas in the future will result in a continuous rise in the demand for NEATS and a substantial increase in the workload of NEATS attendants, whether it knows if the HA has considered increasing the number of non-emergency ambulances and raising the remuneration packages of NEATS attendants to retain talents and attract talents to join the service; if the HA has, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Housing Bureau and the Transport and Logistics Bureau and the Hospital Authority (HA), the consolidated reply to the question raised by the Hon Lam Chun-sing is as follows:

(1) The HA's non-emergency ambulance transfer service (NEATS) mainly provides point-to-point transfer service for public hospital patients who are unable to use other transportation means (e.g. bus, taxi, vehicle of elderly homes or Rehabus, etc.) due to mobility disability or mental/sensory impairment. The clinical conditions of the patients using this service should meet certain criteria such as being bed-ridden or requiring constant oxygen supply. Generally speaking, healthcare staff will confirm with eligible patients and their families/carers if use of the NEATS is required and make appropriate arrangements accordingly.

The total number of patient trips served by the NEATS and among which, the number of patient trips serving discharged patients over the past five years are set out in the following table:

Year	Total number of patient trips served (including hospital admission, transfer, discharge and medical consultation)	Number of patient trips serving discharged patients
2018-19	552 729	189 960
2019-20	532 134	193 731
2020-21	425 263	186 193
2021-22	518 005	211 427
2022-23	562 173	224 690

Note: In view of the emergence of the COVID-19 epidemic in Hong Kong since early 2020, the HA adjusted its services in response to the epidemic. This should be taken into account when comparing the throughput of services provided by the HA across the years.

The HA does not maintain the statistical data by the types of patients served.

(2) The manpower statistics of the NEATS over the past five years are set out in the following table:

Year	Number of staff (i) (As of March 31 each year)	Full-time attrition (wastage) number (ii)	Intake number (iii)
2018-19	704	60	107
2019-20	798	78	173
2020-21	880	67	153

2021-22	942	87	143
2022-23	981	78	121

(i) The manpower figures above are calculated on a full-time equivalent basis including permanent, contract and temporary staff in the HA.

(ii) Attrition (Wastage) includes all types of cessation of service from the HA for permanent and contract staff on headcount basis.

(iii) Intake refers to the total number of permanent and contract staff joining the HA on headcount basis during the period. Transfer, promotion and staff movement within the HA are not included.

(3) Regarding the parking arrangement of the HA's non-emergency ambulances in the public housing estates under the Hong Kong Housing Authority, according to the prevailing policy, relevant vehicles entering the estates for boarding and alighting of patients will be provided with one hour of free parking. In addition, depending on the design and usage of the roads in individual estates, such vehicles may be arranged to park in a designated space.

As for the application for special purpose vehicle, according to the Road Traffic Ordinance (Cap. 374), "special purpose vehicle" means a motor vehicle designed, constructed or adapted primarily for use other than the carriage on a road of goods, drivers or passengers. Before applying for the relevant vehicle license from the Transport Department, applicants must first obtain an approval from the relevant government department(s) for the purpose of the vehicle. The design and structure of the vehicle must also comply with the requirements of the relevant legislations.

Converting the HA's non-emergency ambulances to special purpose vehicles could not directly improve operational efficiency, and driving a special purpose vehicle requires a separate license, which may in turn increase difficulties in operation and recruitment of drivers. Considering that the existing non-emergency ambulances of the HA are generally sufficient to meet the service needs, the HA has no plan to apply for conversion of non-emergency ambulances to special purpose vehicles.

(4) The HA attaches great importance to the manpower situation in public hospitals and launched a series of measures to attract and retain manpower, including strengthening recruitment of full-time and part-time staff, further employment of suitable staff beyond retirement through the policy of Extending Employment Beyond Retirement as well as provision of better training and promotion opportunities for existing staff, in order to further retain manpower. Regarding the manpower in respect of NEATS, the HA had initiated discussion with and listened to the views of relevant stakeholders in March 2023, and is currently actively considering in detail various aspects of the matter and studying the feasibility of the relevant proposals. Among these, the HA plans to add eight non-emergency ambulances and 160 NEATS posts in 2023-24 in order to meet the service needs. The numbers of non-emergency ambulances over the past five years are set out in the following table:

Year	Number of non-emergency ambulances
2018-19	231
2019-20	238
2020-21	262
2021-22	276
2022-23	276