

Ombudsman probes utilisation of low-charge hospital beds in private hospitals

The following is issued on behalf of the Office of The Ombudsman:

The Ombudsman, Ms Winnie Chiu, today (July 10) announced a direct investigation to examine the Government's work in monitoring and promoting the utilisation of low-charge hospital beds in private hospitals and identify areas for improvement, if any.

Two private hospitals in Hong Kong are required to comply with the land grant conditions and provide no less than 20 per cent of their total beds as low-charge hospital beds. At present, the two hospitals provide a total of 164 low-charge beds. The Department of Health (DH) monitors the provision of low-charge beds by these two private hospitals to ensure their compliance with the relevant land grant conditions.

The relevant requirements stipulate that the daily hospital charges (including fees for the hospital bed, meals and nursing services) for a low-charge bed shall not exceed the maximum fee charged for a third-class bed in public hospitals, which is currently \$120 per day, while other hospital charges (such as fees for the operating theatre, laboratory tests, X-ray examinations and medication) shall not exceed half the fees for same services charged for a second-class bed in the private hospital concerned. The preliminary inquiry by the Office of The Ombudsman found that although the two private hospitals do provide low-charge beds as stipulated in the land grant conditions, there is still room for improvement in the utilisation rates of those beds.

Meanwhile, the Hospital Authority (HA) has signed agreements separately with the two aforementioned private hospitals allowing the HA to refer suitable public hospital patients to the two hospitals to use their low-charge beds during influenza surges. Patients referred only need to pay a fee equivalent to the basic hospital charges of public hospitals and the other fees would be borne by the HA. During the 2017 summer surge and the 2017-18 winter surge of influenza, the HA activated the referral agreements. However, only 35 and 25 patients were referred respectively by public hospitals. The small number of patients referred indicated that the existing referral mechanism failed to improve the utilisation rate of low-charge beds, and could hardly alleviate the strong demand for hospital beds in public hospitals.

In this light, The Ombudsman decided to initiate a direct investigation against the Food and Health Bureau, the DH and the HA. Ms Chiu said, "The demand for hospital beds in public hospitals is huge. Proper utilisation of low-charge beds in private hospitals should help ease the burden on the

public healthcare system. Our direct investigation aims to examine and explore how the Government can further enhance the utilisation of low-charge beds in private hospitals."

The Ombudsman now invites members of the public to give their views on the above topic in writing to the Office of The Ombudsman by August 11, 2019:

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