

Welcome speech by SFH at opening ceremony of Health Research Symposium 2021 (English only) (with photo)

Following is the welcome speech by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, at the opening ceremony of the Health Research Symposium 2021 today (November 23):

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you all today to the Health Research Symposium 2021, and a special welcome to our overseas honoured keynote speakers, Professor Butler (Professor of Primary Care, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, University of Oxford, United Kingdom, Professor Chris Butler), Professor Glasziou (Director, Institute for Evidence-Based Healthcare, Faculty of Health Sciences and Medicine, Bond University, Australia, Professor Paul Glasziou), Professor Nilsen (Professor, Department of Health, Medicine and Caring Sciences, Linköping University, Sweden, Professor Per Nilsen) and Professor Riley (Professor, Infectious Disease Dynamics, School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College London, United Kingdom, Professor Steven Riley), some of whom will deliver their lectures in the very early morning from their home country.

This year's Symposium marks an important milestone, as we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Health and Medical Research Fund (HMRF). The HMRF was established in 2011 by consolidating the former Health and Health Services Research Fund (HHSRF) and the former Research Fund for the Control of Infectious Diseases (RFCID), with a broadened scope for funding health and medical research in Hong Kong. Before the establishment of the HHSRF in 2002, the research projects on health services issues were funded under the former Health Services Research Fund (HSRF) set up in 1994.

Over the past 30 years, the Food and Health Bureau (FHB), through the HMRF and its former funds, has taken the lead in supporting health-related research. The HMRF is uniquely positioned as the only local funding platform bridging the gap between benchtop research and clinical translation research findings. Its effectiveness derives from its collaborative support to locally based researchers and scientists from academia, frontline medical professionals from all disciplines and NGOs.

The central theme of this year's Symposium, "Implementing evidence-based research in the era of COVID-19 and other global health challenges", aims to understand how the challenges to the healthcare system resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic can be mitigated through application of evidence-based research findings, and well reflects the HMRF's objectives.

Since April 2020, the FHB and the HMRF have awarded a total of \$513

million to 67 COVID-19 research studies from bench to bedside to community. The findings from many of these studies have been published in nearly 90 peer-reviewed articles in some of the world's leading medical journals. Some studies have provided early results and this new evidence is crucial in informing government health policies, for example:

- The real-time population-based sero-epidemiological studies identify a very low asymptomatic infection rate of COVID-19 in the community which reflects the anti-epidemic measures implemented by the Government that have effectively curbed the spread of COVID-19 in the community;
- Wastewater surveillance has provided a complementary system to monitor virus activity at the community level and to detect resurgences of COVID-19 at an early stage;
- Genomic surveillance using virus sequence data has helped identify the epidemiological link and untangle virus transmission dynamics in the community, which provides useful and timely information for quarantine arrangements, vaccine efficacy and clinical management of the local COVID-19 epidemic;
- The world's first Phase 1 clinical trial of a locally developed intranasal COVID-19 vaccine candidate, VectorFlu ONE, in 30 healthy adult volunteers found it to be safe for human use;
- Vaccination studies proved that both Comirnaty and CoronaVac vaccines are safe and highly effective in protecting the vaccinated population by preventing severe cases and death from COVID-19 and the findings in the level, duration and immunogenicity of antibodies in several vaccinated population groups helped to provide important reference for formulating strategies for booster vaccination; and
- Projections based on regular population surveys on vaccine confidence have highlighted the need to increase vaccination uptake rates in the elderly through facilitating measures.

The HMRF has also committed extensive resources to support research on primary healthcare and non-communicable diseases and many of these studies are being showcased today. Several studies, for example, those on tobacco control and cancer screening, have had a positive impact on the quality of life and overall population health through informing health policy and decision-making as well as enhancing clinical practice and health services. The significant reduction in smoking and tobacco use in Hong Kong in recent years and the implementation of the Breast Cancer Screening Pilot Programme are just two examples of the application of findings from HMRF-funded research projects.

I wish to thank the 24 local speakers on today's programme and the project teams for submitting more than 200 abstracts of projects funded by the HMRF. I am sure we will learn much from their insightful research and presentations. We shall be honouring the many excellent researchers who have contributed their efforts to improving the health of the Hong Kong population through an award ceremony. To recognise the excellent research efforts on COVID-19 and celebrate the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the HMRF, two categories of special award, namely, Outstanding Project Team on COVID-19

Research Award and 10th HMRF Anniversary Award, will be presented this year.

I thank the members of the Organising Committee, Review Panel and Poster Judges of this Symposium, the moderators of the keynote and parallel sessions, and the notable local experts appearing in the video celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Fund.

I would also like to thank four Government-appointed experts, some are here today, Professor Gabriel Leung (Dean of the Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong), Professor Keiji Fukuda (Director and Clinical Professor of the School of Public Health of the University of Hong Kong and former Assistant Director General of the World Health Organization), Professor David Hui (Stanley Ho Professor of Respiratory Medicine and Director of the Stanley Ho Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases) and Professor K Y Yuen (Chair of Infectious Diseases, Department of Microbiology, Li Ka Shing Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong, Professor Yuen Kwok-yung). I would also like to thank chairmen of various committees which have been helping the Government throughout the COVID-19 epidemic on vaccines and other aspects, including Professor C S Lau (Convenor of the Advisory Panel on COVID-19 Vaccines, Professor Wallace Lau), who is also here today and chairs the expert committee on vaccine authorisation; Professor Ivan Hung (Co-convenor of the Expert Committee on Clinical Events Assessment Following COVID-19 Immunisation); Dr Lee Cheuk-kwong (Co-convenor of the Expert Committee on Clinical Events Assessment Following COVID-19 Immunisation); Professor Y L Lau (Chairman of the Scientific Committee on Vaccine Preventable Diseases, Professor Lau Yu-lung); as well as Professor David Hui (Chairman of the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Zoonotic Diseases). These are chairmen of different committees that have been helping us. They have also provided a lot of input on COVID-19 research.

Finally, if we look back on history, 27 years ago in 1994, the HSRF, the HHSRF, the RFCID, the HCPF (Health Care and Promotion Fund) and the HMRF now, I think without our collaboration, co-operation and support from the academics, our friends in academia and the health services sector, the result would not be possible. The advancement of science, the saving of lives, the advancement of quality of life of people and the improvement of health of the people in Hong Kong would not be possible.

Thank you all for contributing your valuable time and providing steer on this remarkable event. I invite you all to enjoy the Symposium today and I wish you all very good health. Thank you.

