

Our Suggestions on enhancing and expanding primary health care in Hong Kong

Professor Sek Ying CHAIR, President, Hong Kong Academy of Nursing (September 2020)

The first District Health Centre (DHC), a new district-based service model operating through medical-social and public-private partnership, was established in Kwai Tsing in 2019 as a key government initiative to support primary health care development in Hong Kong. Nurses as the largest group of health care professionals are expected to make greater contributions in this area. In order to improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of primary health care services, the Hong Kong Academy of Nursing (HKAN) would like to make some suggestions as below.

In enhancing primary health care nursing quality, we suggest setting up qualification and experience requirements for nurses to work in primary health care, especially in DHC, to ensure not only the quality and accountability of practice, but also the autonomy of practice in the scope of services. The standards and guidelines of practice and services in primary health care are needed to be developed, and an audit mechanism with client outcome indicators should also be in place for monitoring nurses' performance to ensure service quality.

In supporting primary health care development and expansion, we suggest identifying effective strategies to attract and retain more experienced nurses to serve in this specialty area. Such strategies may include more resources in recruitment, a clear career pathway and a flexible working schedule. Currently, primary health care services in the territory are provided by different sectors, including the Department of Health, Hospital Authority, non-governmental organisations and private service providers. We suggest establishing a Primary Health Care Network to better consolidate and coordinate health resources, and to facilitate effective monitoring of the quality of primary health care services provided by different sectors. Besides, many non-emergency community-based primary health care services were suspended during the COVID-19 outbreak. This might be a good opportunity and the right time to develop a structural community telehealth service to support community-dwelling people with chronic illnesses. The scope and standards of practice for professional telehealth nursing in Hong Kong should also be developed in the near future.

In strengthening primary health care nursing workforce, education is the key. Nurses are needed to be academically and professionally well prepared for working in primary health care to support service development and expansion, and to address the increasing demands in this specialty area. We suggest providing more continuing nursing education courses to update and enrich nurses' knowledge and competencies in primary health care. Indeed, HKAN has been working closely with her 14 Academy Colleges in this education aspect. As most of these continuing education courses are self-financed, incentives are needed to encourage and support nurses for enrollment. In addition, we suggest collaborating with local universities in providing structural postgraduate programmes at master's or higher levels to facilitate primary health care nursing development.

Finally, we suggest enhancing the utilisation of all allied health professionals, including nurses, pharmacists, clinical psychologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapist and Chinese medicine practitioners, to even out power and responsibilities and avoid over focusing on any profession in primary health care delivery. This paradigm shift in health care delivery would help correct the inefficient distribution of health resources and balance the escalating health care costs. Most importantly, the increase of the number of health care providers from allied health professions would significantly improve service accessibility and affordability, allowing people in Hong Kong to receive high quality primary health care services that they deserve.