

主旨: Submission on the Population Policy Consultation

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Consultation document spent a few pages listing out the challenges faced by the elderly, and has invited us to make comments on the active aging environment, silver hair market and retirement in the mainland. What the consultation document has not mentioned, however, is the support to the long term carers of the elderly.

Amongst the elderly population, an estimated 74% suffer from some kind of chronic illness, some of which require long term support from a carer. In our city, the primary caregivers of these patients are usually informal carers, either the patient's elderly spouses or daughters. Those with dementia or stroke in particular may require a carer to be present with the elderly 24 hours a day, as they might be totally dependent on such carers. Studies have showed that 3.9% of the male population and 5.2% of the female population aged 35 years or above act as informal carers, spending 13.3 to 36.0 hours a week on caregiving activities. Unfortunately, the carers have often under-appreciated, and suffer from physical, mental, financial and social problems themselves.

It is encouraging to hear recently that the Social and Welfare Department is exploring the possibility of providing additional financial support to those who are long term caregivers, who are unable to seek other sources of income as they have to focus on caregiving activities. In addition to financial benefits, we would suggest the government to provide the following additional support to the carers:

1. Provide additional respite places for the patients to relieve the full time informal carers of their stress. The government now mainly relies on NGO's to provide the majority of the respite places, and those offered by the SWD are minimal. We suggest that more spaces should be offered, either directly via the SWD or by providing financial support to the NGO's.
2. Explore the possibility of legislation to recognize the contribution and the status of these carers. Australia, for example, passed a national legislation in the past few years to officially recognise the indispensable nature of these carers ("Carer Recognition Act 2010"). Passing a national legislation would help raise awareness of the needs of these carers and offer encouragement to the private corporations to provide the necessary additional support and assistance to their employees who also act as informal carers.
3. Conduct a city wide census to identify the estimated number of informal carers present, their demography and caring details, including approximate time and money spent. There has never been a territory wide estimation of the number of carers present in the community. The only approximate data available stems from a study carried out by The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The government claims that it has difficult to estimate exactly the number of carers present, even though other national governments such as the UK and Australia have both made approximate census measurements. It will be difficult for the government to make national policies if it lacks the most basic and fundamental data collection.
4. Improve information provision on the services available to carers. Many carers nowadays face the challenge of not knowing where to seek help. The problem is especially prevalent amongst the elderly, when the informal carer might be the elderly spouse. It is particularly difficult for the elderly to search what is offered by the government and NGO's when there is a lack of an easily accessible source of information. Such information should also be tailored to different age groups as well, encompassing different channels including social media, the internet and traditional printed media available at elderly centres.

5. Partner with Hospital Authority to improve on the multi-disciplinary support for these carers, including mental and physical support. As carers often suffer from immense mental stress whilst taking care of their loved ones, they would need mental advice and support from professionals. Patients suffering from diseases such as Alzheimer's Dementia may be particularly debilitating, as the patients may not be able to recognise their loved ones who are caring for them. Further mental support should be offered to the carers to help them to deal with the stress and cope with the change.

6. Encourage more people to volunteer and participate in care-giving activities. Only by being more involved in the day to day caring activity can one truly appreciate the value and the devotion these carers make for their loved ones. Special promotion may be aimed towards the youth in particular, through multiple platforms including VTC and HKCSS, to invite them to join in this field of care-giving so as to reduce the burden of elderly caregivers.

Carers play an indispensable role in our society taking care of the elderly, yet do not receive sufficient recognition for their contribution. As a developed society, we believe that we can show our gratitude and appreciation to these informal carers by at least creating more widespread awareness of their needs and dedication. Carers are equally in need of help and support from us. We hope that the upcoming population policy will include special focus on the methods to support our carers.

Yours sincerely,  
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