

The government's consultation into the "healthcare system" needs to address both public and private healthcare systems and their medical professionals. In Dr. York Chow's opening message, he says "we have to address the shortcomings of the present system ...etc". The reality of the current system is that a good portion of Hong Kong's health services are provided by private medical facilities and professionals, and any reform therefore needs to look also at this sector.

In fact, HK's private medical system is deeply flawed due primarily to the government's unwillingness and shirking of responsibility to regulate and license this sector:

- 1. There are virtually no controls over licensing, pricing, or level or quality of service being provided. The doctors police themselves, determining who can practice as a doctor, prices charged, and minimal standards for license renewal. Needless to say, doctor's interest in profit often takes priority over the quality of care and licensing standards. Doctors do have a long-term interest in not seeing standards fall, but in reality, most doctors will operate according to short-term profit motives.**
- 2. Private doctors have complete control over prescription, pricing, and sale of medicines . Patients are not even told unit prices for the various medicines being given us -- just a total price including consultation fees, lab fees, etc. If a patient asks for a breakdown, this information is given reluctantly. Doctors do not disclose their inherent conflict of interest: they are paid or given benefits by pharmaceutical distributors or manufacturers, such as charging for samples provided free to doctors.**
- 3. Doctors determine their own consultation fees. Fees should be tied to time spent with the doctor, with different fee levels for different medical specialties. Patients often refer to doctors' clinics as "production line processing".**
- 4. Several years ago, I went to see an ophthalmologist who clearly had a mild case of Alzheimer's disease. He had to keep asking me every 30 seconds or so, which eye was the eye bothering me.**

He could not remember. Yet, after the consultation, his fee was the same as before, and when I challenged the nurse about the ethical standard of a doctor with Alzheimer's continuing to practice, she did not dispute my contention that the doctor had Alzheimer's but merely suggested I make an appointment to see another doctor using the same clinic. And insisted that the fee must be paid nevertheless. In such instances, patients should have recourse, for example, an ombudsman or consumer council where they can lodge their complaints for follow-up, independently and objectively.

- 5. Doctors do not offer warranties for their work. What doctor would purchase a car or TV system that comes with no warranty? Yet, what doctor in Hong Kong would provide a warranty or guarantee in writing for the service being provided? If a doctor does not solve a specific problem for you, he/she usually suggests you go see another doctor. Will they refund you the fees that you can paid them? Of course not.**

So my first suggestion is that the Hong Kong Government must set in place a system that regulates the medical system, both public and private, with regulations that govern:

- the licensing of who can carry on the practice of providing medical services and products**
- the pricing that can be charged for such medical services and products, and that there should be some relationship between the charges for the same service/product between the public and private medical systems**
- standards that must be met on a periodic basis to maintain continuance of the license to practice**

Secondly, the government must support the establishment of a "Consumer Council" type of agency that can provide assistance and expert witness assistance to patients and consumers seeking redress and accountability for negligent or malpractice actions from services provide by private medical service providers. The agency should be impartial and independent or at least free from control by the medical practitioners, who have an interest in suppressing complaints about malpractice.

Frequently the HK government has a “hands off” approach to industry in the belief that a hands off approach fosters competition and makes the economy more efficient. This may well be the case in other industries, such as consumer industries or finance. But medicine is different. In this case, the government has an obligation to emerge as the “fixer of last resort.” When a patient is harmed due to an unscrupulous private doctor, the government has no choice but to step in and save the patient’s life, at the government’s own expense. So it is in the government’s long-term interests, not to mention people’s safety, to ensure that private medical practitioners are upright and operate according to the patient’s best interest rather than their own profit motives. The licensing of Chinese medicine practitioners is a step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done in the area of Western medicine practitioners.

The bulk of your consultation document assumes that medical expenses are high, expensive, and getting more expensive. But you never address the question of how to contain costs from the private medical side, and thus, with the costs of private medical care being so outrageously expensive and unquestioned, consumers are compelled to seek medical care from the public side.

You need a two pronged approach to this issue – public and private systems, and to then address the costs charged to the consumer under each system, and then address the issue of how to deliver the resources necessary to cover the costs under each system.

As it is, you are merely tackling one half of the problem. This is the major shortcoming of your analysis of what ails the Hong Kong healthcare system. Your document is merely asking for opinion on how to do the financing, but the issues are much broader, and it is these issues that ought to be addressed when asking the question, “How to reform the Hong Kong healthcare system?”

Coming up with financing options don't do much good when costs and expenses cannot be controlled or spiral out of control.

P.C. Mar