

Feedback on HK Healthcare Reform

Key Concept “the last few years”

Analysed and Discussed

12 June 2008

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Summary

This paper addresses two areas :

1. it looks into the reform approach, and finds that the reform methodology basically can't shake off from the old formula tried elsewhere. It is bounded to inherent the deficiencies encountered by those other countries. The problem as highlighted in this paper is the reform missed the key vital factors and failed to apply innovative thinking. As such, the end product of the reform may still not able to achieve the objectives. A recommendation will be proposed taking into considerations of population ageing, available resource and especially human factors.
2. according to the various proposal highlighted in the reform paper, the compulsory insurance seems the most preferable option. Some adjustment however is recommended especially to cater for low income persons, please refer to Appendix A.

This study paper is based upon the following major ideas, some were mentioned in the government reform proposal :

1. the HK population is ageing and reliance on health care will increase sharply in the near future
2. the government won't be able to support such expanding medical needs with the existing revenue and taxation system
3. in numerous media interviews and in the reform proposal, government representatives emphasized that medical cost usually increases astronomically during the "last few years" of a patients life. This is understandable and is believed to be the major cause of not enough medical funding mentioned in point 2.
4. This point not considered in the reform proposal. It is about human factors. Patients in their "last few years" of life, who consume most medical resources, are usually in great pain, organs deteriorating, paralysed, lost basic ability to take care themselves for even simple daily activities, and with incurable illness. Not all, but some patients under such unbearable pain conditions (both physically and mentally) with no hope of recovery, will actually wish not to prolong suffering.
5. This seems pretty obvious that ways to help shorten the suffering of patients in great pain with incurable disease in their "last few years" of life could be the best treatment considered by some patients, and could possibly relieve situations 2 and 3 indirectly to come up with a win-win situation.

Funding, Resource and Human Factors

Existing System

The existing Hong Kong health care system approach have its merits recognized by other countries.

Public hospitals provide an excellent safety net to patients with serious illness and elderly. This classified high priority patients receive relative prompt treatment and only need to pay a fraction of the medical cost.

However, with a limited funding, it is impossible to provide the same level of service across a wide spectrum of patients.

As a result, lots of younger patients and patients with less serious illness are being left out from the public hospital. For example, an appointment to do a diagnostic could take half a year or longer. Some, unfortunately, later developed into a more serious conditions because of missing the best timing for treatment.

Also because of funding and resource, the quality of medical consultation are so bad that patients and even the government doctors are complaining there are too little time given to each patient to give a proper diagnostic, treatment and follow up.

As population is ageing with more elderly people, there will be more “high priority” patients. Unfortunately the funding and resource will increase in a much slower pace. The outcomes are hospitals will need to allocate even higher percentage of the funding for high priority patients, this will result in the service to other patients deteriorating even further. Alternative is to lower the service standard across the board , this however at some point may lead to the whole healthcare system crumbling.

Health Care Reform

Injecting more funding from the public in terms of health insurance or saving is one way to boost the overall available medical funding and resource, and to encourage setting up more private hospitals and practice.

This reform seemingly can provide an immediate boost to service levels to those patients currently not classified as high priority patients in the public system.

However I doubt it can actually solve the root problem highlighted in the reform proposal. Many years experience of similar measures in other countries demonstrate that in the long run, such measures only mitigate the problem to some minor degree and can only delay the timing of the bottleneck happening.

New problems, e.g. misuse, malpractice, will associate with medical insurance and saving schemes and there are other well-known problems which I won't go into details here. The major problem is health premium will escalate very quickly to levels not easily affordable.

Even with more public money. When there are more and more patients and coupled with the inherent problems associated with medical insurance/saving schemes, the public and private systems will still be overloaded sooner or later.

Many schemes which the government wants to modify and adapt do not achieve their original goals. For example, Australia, having one of the better health care system in the world, is not in fact coping fine as one wishes. People with private health insurance cover is on the decline, premium are rising sharply and public hospitals are also congested.

The methodology taken by the government is not solving the root problem. **The root problem is rightly quoted by the government in the reform discussions that the “last few years” of a patient consume the most funding and resource from the health care system. As population is aging, more people will enter these “last few years”.** This is the real problem of the whole health care system worldwide where no existing scheme ever in the world can tackle this root problem properly.

Hong Kong has got the right timing to initiate such healthcare reform. However, the government seems fail to recognise the full meaning of this “last few years” and that it holds the key to this reform. It would be a shame that the government too reliance on derivatives of old concepts and miss the chance to explore a whole new dimension to come up with a healthcare reform which will be appraised worldwide in the years to come.

Why not a more open, innovative thinking please

My observation is that most people working in the health care industry, including consultants making various proposals for health care reform, are bounded by their background and inherencies which in turns limited their scope of thinking and in formulating a new healthcare system to truly solve the root problem.

Lets look at this problem from a different dimension, perspective with emphasis on real human, their thinking, feelings and their wishes. So far “last few years” seems to be an important concept to a patients and also to the government in initiating the healthcare reform as one of the major reason to ask for more public money.

Now the “last few years” seems to hold the key to the success of this reform and can also unlock the concerns raised by patients and government at the same time. So let’s look into this key idea in more details.

“Last few years” Considerations

Patients side

There is an old saying in Chinese to curse other people that “mind your last few years in life”. This is very true.

Most people will die in their old age when they change from healthy to weak, and then ill to more ill and then they die. For some, the “last few years” living with

serious illness is an intolerable torture. Some may select, if they still can, to skip this extremely painful, helpless and hopeless period of their life.

Surely, there are exception when a healthy people die suddenly and unexpectedly, e.g fatal accident, then they may still be able to enjoy their “last few years”. Most people are not that “fortunate”.

By the nature of the statement, “last few years of a patient’s life” depicts a patient dies of an serious illness or complications caused by the illness. Such illness is not easily curable by latest medical technology that is why the patient dies because of it.

In most cases, such serious illness caused the patients great and unbearable pain most of the time for a long time, we are talking about months or even years

The illness reduces or even ceases the ability of the patient to take care one self’s essential need of being a human e.g. eating, bathing, urinating...etc, for a long time with no hope of improving or recovering.

On the mental side, because of the illness, the transformation from a self-dependent human to a complete dependence on others, most patients will lose all self respect and esteem. This is also a lot of suffering.

So in this “last few years” torture, some considerable percentage of patients suffering great pain and terminal illness will select to, if they have choice, to stop this suffering altogether and do not want to linger with pain, immobility for these “last few years”.

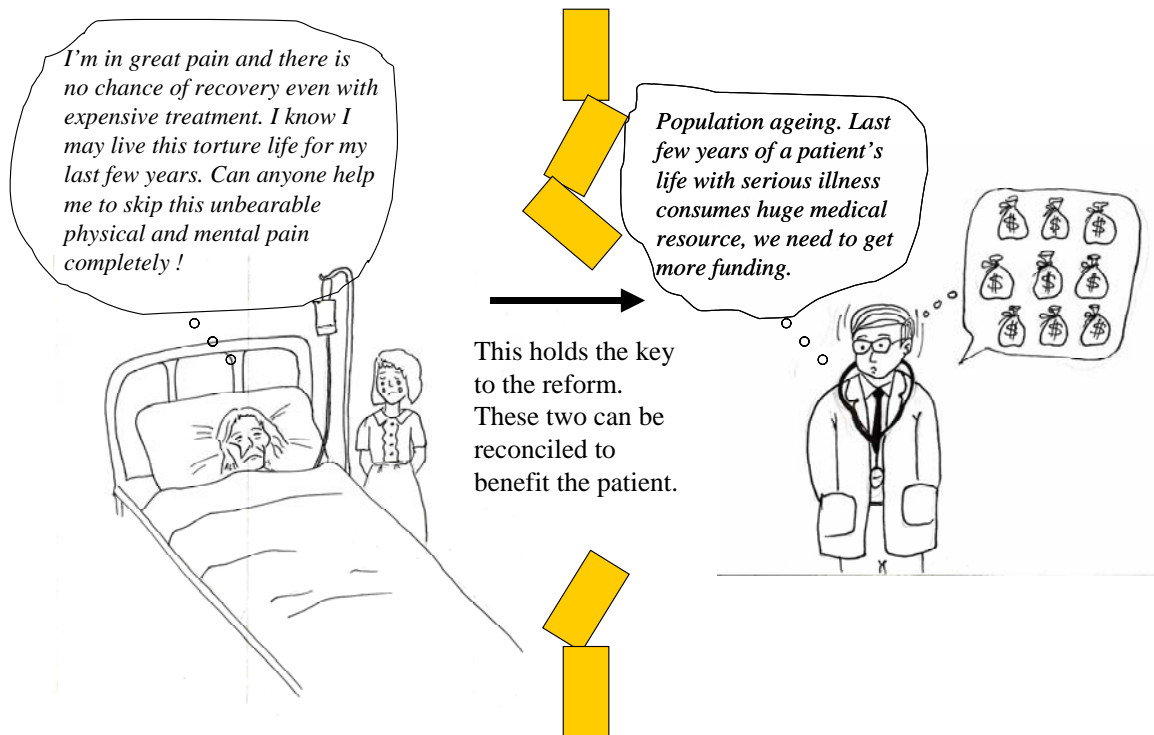
Government Healthcare Reform side

In this healthcare reform exercise, it is clearly that the government is also troubled by this “last few years” of a patient’s life.

The government put up such reform proposal and saying that HK will be lack of medical funding and resource because of ageing population. In many occasions the government mentioned one of the major reasons is these “last few years” of life where medical cost will be astronomical. As a result, reform tends to ask people to inject more money into the system by buying medical insurance/saving to cope with this “last few years” of their life.

By now, it is clear that the government is the only party facing this “last few years” but also some dying patients. A collaborative action and thinking by the government is clearly necessary.

The cartoons in the next page portrait the current situations and what should be done next by the government.



Logical Next Step

After examine the two sides, do this ring the bell ?

Now you know some patients are troubled by this “last few years” of life. The government is also troubled by this “last few years” of patient’s life , but on different causes so far. The government should start to put more thought on the “last few years” to reconcile their view with that of the patients.

Do you see the mapping here ? It is quite clear now by solving the “last few years” trouble experienced by some patients, the government can quite automatically partly mitigate the “last few years” trouble the government is facing which is one of the major reasons for this reform.

Please note that the order of thinking is very important here, it can’t be the other way round. The thinking has to be originated from helping the patient. The reverse order won’t work, i.e it can’t be because of the reform need to save fund and we have to do this and do that.

So what is the logical next step ? So far the government seems recognize the “last few years” trouble only from their perspective, they failed to recognise patients view on this “last few years” . The government didn’t realise there could be a win-win situation here.

Recommended actions

From now on, the government should view this key issue from an all round dimensions, both theirs and patients, and dedicate more efforts in the reform to formulate an workable proposal to achieve a win-win solution to this “last few years” considerations.

With the above in mind, going back to the previous argument about the limited medical funding. If the government finally come up with a way to collaboratively handle this “last few years” key issue. Surely, the overall healthcare system will have a more balanced approach. The immediate benefit is to have better attentions to low priority patients before their illness developed to more serious conditions.

The government should devote more resource to investigate as part of the reform, a practical way from a patient point of view how to relieve the great torture from his/her “last few years”. The following are just some ideas to stimulate thinking not meant to be exhaustive :

- although sounds quite far fetching, provide, say, a once daily injection to kill all the pain and provide strong energy booster to bring a serious illness patient up to live a normal human being basic living quality. Such injection can or cannot heal the actual illness, but this really doesn't matter. Space exploration and internet were also far fetching ideas not so long ago.
- If the above not available in the immediate future, the government should consider other solution, e.g the Netherlands experience, to give a choice to eligible “last few years” patients, under strict scrutiny, to live painlessly and die peacefully, and most importantly to help shorten such torture period as much as possible.

The government should, as part of the reform, devise an objective point system assessment framework(see appendix B), eligible patients should be given a choice.

Conclusions

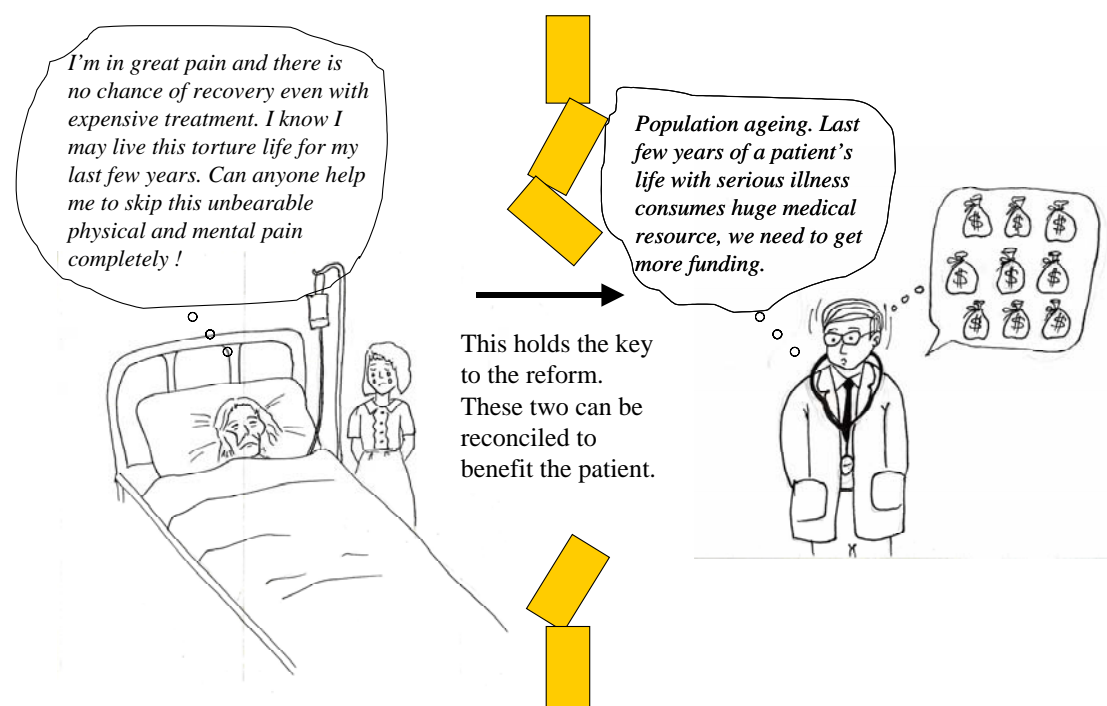
While the healthcare reform is a good initiative to tackle the aging population, its idea is however only derivatives based on old, proven unsuccessful approaches.

The government should add more human considerations in the reform. In this paper, the significant of “last few years” of a patient’s life was looked into. It explained the whole issue, as viewed from different dimensions, seems to heavily related to this “last few years” concept - the key to this reform.

On one hand, the government emphasize these “last few years” of a patient consume astronomical amount of funding and resources because there are more advanced but expensive treatment available. The government recognises this “last few years” being one of the major reasons of the reform. On the other hand, certain percentage of patients suffering from serious illness with great pain find these “last three years” of their lives great torture both physical and mentally, and would like to skip this miserable part of their life altogether if they have the choice.

So instead of just asking more and more contribution from the general public to implement a scheme which may still end up with a not-quite sound healthcare system. The government should continue the analysis of this paper on the “last few years” key concept to come up with a sound solution to relieve patients from this “last few years” great pain, which in the writer’s opinion can refine the original objectives of this reform to come up with a truly successful healthcare system.

Solutions to implement the treatment to this “last few years” for patients were proposed. There is at least one solution readily available and is proven workable in other part of the world.



In a nutshell, Hong Kong has got the right timing to initiate such healthcare reform. However, the government seems fail to recognise the full meaning of this “last few years” which actually holds the key to this reform. It would be a loss that the government, being too reliance on derivatives of old concepts, miss the chance to explore a whole new dimension to come up with a healthcare reform which will be appraised worldwide in the years to come.

Contact :

Appendix A

Healthcare Option

I would opt for a compulsory health insurance scheme with the following details :

Suppose there will be different health insurance plans with different protection levels available from different health insurance companies and hence premium to suit individual's need and affordability

For low income earners, they may not be able to afford even a basic plan. I suggest the government should subsidize whole or part of the premium so as to make sure they are covered by a basic plan.

Appendix B

Point system to determine patient eligibility for special terminal pain relieve treatment.

Note the determination of the points and execution of such are administrated by a formal independent board of members within a new organization to be setup for this purpose.

Points

- Age (15%)
- Mobility/ Self care index (30%)
- Illness category* (35%)
 - o Pain (physical) index
 - o Pain (mental) index
- Chance of improvement and recovery* (20%)

Patient score above 80 points is eligible for treatment to shortcut their life to skip the illness torture period.

The items with an (*) are constantly updated based on the current medical technology and actual updated patient statistics.