

## CHAPTER 2 – WHY DOCTOR WORK REFORM?

### I. Root Causes

- 201 Hong Kong, with frugal public expenditure on public health (about 3% of Hong Kong's Gross Domestic Products), enjoys a high level of health service at world standard with good health indices as reflected by long life expectancy as well as low maternal and neonatal mortality rate. With a growing economy and improving general education level in the region, coupled with pervasive publicity of the swift advancement of sophisticated medical technologies, the community is raising its expectation on quality and standards of public hospital services.
- 202 The rising community expectation has brought about unprecedented challenges for HA. There is a growing demand on HA to provide adequate and timely access to a wide range of comprehensive healthcare services and complicated medical interventions, despite the budgetary constraints in recent years. In consequence, HA hospitals are overstretched and public hospital doctors have taken on heavier duties and worked for longer hours in order to cope with the increasing demand and workload over the past years.
- 203 Based on local and overseas findings, clinical activities in hospitals are relatively less intense after midnight. This may not be fully reflected in the current deployment of overnight medical staffing in HA. Hence, the current night-time work pattern and long unsocial hours worked by comparatively junior doctors in HA hospitals, while consuming a significant portion of our scarce medical resources, may potentially lead to errors that may compromise patient safety.
- 204 A greater medical workforce is needed to cope with the rising workload in HA hospitals. However, it is envisaged that there will be a shortage of medical professionals in the public healthcare system in the coming years. The anticipated shortage of medical workforce, together with all the above confounding factors, has made reform in both service mode and doctors' work patterns necessary in order to ensure sustainable and quality patient care services in public hospitals.

### II. Undesirable Phenomenon

- 205 It is often said that "great doctors grow up by apprenticeship". This conventional mode of professional learning and development adopted by doctors inevitably leads to long weekly and continuous work hours. There is ample evidence that excessive and prolonged work has negative impacts on health. Doctors who provide on-site hospital care throughout the night may suffer from sleep deprivation. Their inability to concentrate and propensity for inattentiveness after long hours of work may pose risks not only to themselves but also to patients under their care. Apart from the long and excessive work hours, HA doctors are also faced with other problems, such as equal work and unequal pay, unequal work and equal pay as well as lack of or slow career progression, which have resulted in low morale among doctors in the past few years.

### III. HA's People Strategy

- 206 It is a key strategic direction of HA to re-engage the management and the frontline staff in modernizing healthcare delivery for the benefit of the community. The Steering Committee understands that, in accordance with its **"People First" strategy**, HA treasures its human resource as a valuable asset and is committed to **improving staff morale, promoting work-life balance and ensuring quality patient care and safety**. Besides, HA actively seeks to improve the working conditions of doctors by managing their heavy workload and curtailing their continuous work hours to a reasonable level. Apart from the New Career and Pay Structure for Doctors as well as Flexible Employment, Doctor Work Reform may form part of HA's continuous efforts to improve staff morale and recognize the contribution of the dedicated doctors.

### IV. Is Doctor Work Reform Really Necessary?

- 207 The Steering Committee is well aware that public hospital services are facing daunting challenges, of which low staff morale is of critical importance. The Steering Committee believes that any piecemeal remedial action will not solve nor revert the looming situation. The Steering Committee advocates a total Doctor Work Reform which should be **the business of everyone in HA**. While cognizant of the fact that not all reforms can be achieved in the right next instant, the Steering Committee recommends HA to work out the right "next step" to ensure the success of reform in the long term.