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For Immediate Release

HKUPOP Survey Shows 90% of Hong Kong Public Seeks Greater Access to Medical Information

Medical Council Practice Promotion Code Outdated, Needs Amendment

(Hong Kong, 15 February 2006) -- More than 90% of the Hong Kong public seeks greater access to medical information, according to a survey conducted by the Public Opinion Programme of The University of Hong Kong (HKUPOP) and commissioned by The Hong Kong Sanatorium & Hospital (HKSH).

"We want to assess the public's attitude towards the availability and accessibility of medical information in Hong Kong", said Dr. Kwong Kwok Hay, Assistant Medical Superintendent of the HKSH today. "We therefore commissioned the HKUPOP to conduct this survey. The results are overwhelming: Hong Kong people want greater access to information. We support this view and believe the Hong Kong Medical Council's existing Professional Code and Conduct ('Code') is overly restrictive. At the present time, the public has only very limited access to information. This study shows this situation is unwelcome and should be changed via a responsible relaxation of the Medical Council's Code."

The HKUPOP survey polled a total of 1,013 Hong Kong residents aged 18 and above, by telephone during the period 1-3 February 2006. The survey showed that the majority of respondents (90%) believe doctors should be able to release service information data, including fees, medical treatment information and availability of specialist services. Currently, the Hong Kong Medical Council only permits doctors to make the most basic information available, including medical practitioner's name, qualifications recognized by the Council, location of the practitioner's office, hours of attendance and the specialist title as approved by the Medical Council.

80% of respondents also agreed that information relating to a specific doctor's experience, skills, or practice should be available both in print and electronic media provided it is accurate and verifiable.

When asked if doctors should enjoy the same right as other professionals, including accountants and lawyers to conduct practice promotion, 74% of respondents felt that doctors should have the same right also.

Of those asked 66% believed that a relaxation of the Code would have no reduction in level of service or treatment quality in Hong Kong. Similarly, respondents believed that a greater ability to communicate services may lead to a reduction in fees, as has been seen in other countries. More than half (51%) of respondents believe that currently there is not enough medical information available in Hong Kong, including clinics available, professional fees, doctors' experience, specialists' details and medical treatment advances or developments.

Currently under the Code, only announcements of commencement of practice or altered conditions of practice (e.g. change of address, partnership etc.) are permissible in newspapers. The Medical Council has relaxed the Code for online publicity only very recently and doctors are now allowed to release a maximum of five medical services available

“We noticed the relaxation of the Code in Hong Kong means we are able to communicate five available medical services online,” commented Dr. Kwong. “Many Hong Kong citizens, in particular the lower income group, may not have the available resources or the knowledge to conduct a search for doctors online. Therefore there is a need for the responsible relaxation of the Code.”

“Let’s take Singapore as an example of a country where a medical publicity code has been amended, for the benefit of the public and the country,” added Dr. Kwong. “In 2004, the Singapore government significantly relaxed restrictions surrounding medical practice communications. Singapore further amended publicity rules, allowing publicity outside of Singapore, resulting in the significant development of that country as a regional medical hub, which attracts ‘health tourists’. The success of the Singapore case demonstrates that, backed by clear guidelines, medical communications guidelines can be successfully and responsibly relaxed.”

“A relaxation of the Code should also result in direct financial benefits to Hong Kong patients,” added Dr. Kwong. “In America, the Federal Trade Commission conducted a study in 1972 on this subject. Practice communication was proven to initiate competition and therefore actually reduce doctors’ professional fees. Their study results also showed that practice promotion allowed the public to learn more about the medical services available and, as a result, make informed choices regarding their doctor and to make the best use of the medical services the doctor offers. These developments were beneficial in the United States and would also be beneficial to the Hong Kong public should similar amendments to the code be made,” concluded Dr. Kwong.

Dr. Robert Chung Ting-Yiu, Programme Director of the Public Opinion Programme, The University of Hong Kong, also commented, “It is important to note that an overwhelming percentage of respondents support greater access to professional medical services information. The public’s requirement for information is clearly not satisfied with the current, restrictive Code. The HKUPOP study demonstrates a clear need for the relevant parties to have detailed discussions on the findings and to identify the best way forward on this important issue.”

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