

Speech by Dr. York Y N Chow
Secretary for Food and Health of the Government of the HKSAR
At the Hospital Authority Convention Opening Ceremony
“Happy Staff . Healthy People” (開心員工 . 共建民康)

A the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre
10 May 2010 (Monday)

Vice Minister Zhang, Mr. Anthony Wu, Mr. Shane Solomon, Honoured guests, friends and colleagues:

I wholeheartedly congratulate the Hospital Authority on its 20th Anniversary. Having “grown up” as a medical professional within the public hospital system, and having been associated with the Hospital Authority since its formation in 1990, this HA Convention provides an opportunity for me, along with all of you, to reflect on the past, and also plan for and look forward to the future.

Many colleagues in this audience have witnessed and been instrumental in the significant positive changes in the public healthcare system. You can probably still recall the period when public hospitals were overwhelmed with patients, and when camp beds in corridors and public areas were the norm rather than exception, and long working hours for doctors (often exceeding 30 hours at a stretch) were common in many specialties.

The modern HA has now developed into a robust, resilient and well-trusted healthcare provider for all the citizens of Hong Kong, and is also the safety net and ultimate choice for patients with serious and rare diseases, and the needy.

The integration of healthcare services, teaching and research, plus close partnerships with the two medical schools, institutes for nursing training and other healthcare professionals training programmes throughout all hospitals in the HA is a unique example. The Hospital Authority is also given the mandate to develop and nurture the majority of our young healthcare graduates and medical specialists. The close partnerships

with the Academy of Medicine and its Colleges, and the HA's association with other nursing and allied health organizations are essential for the upkeep of professional and ethical standards, and to sustain the quality of healthcare for the Hong Kong community. I need to thank all the HA Board Members, the various Hospital Governing Committees, administrative staff and particularly the clinical and frontline staff for their contributions to our favourable health outcome and statistics, which are often the envy of visiting international government and healthcare professionals.

Naturally with this development and progress, the HA has also created a few challenges for itself. Public demands and expectations are at an all time high, and our members of staff are expected to be infallible. Although I sympathize with the pressures on the HA and the stress on its staff, the feelings and expectations of the public must be appreciated. Many patients turn to our hospitals as their last hope for a cure, and all they expect from our healthcare staff are their compassion, sincerity, honesty and reassurance that they are trying their best to help each individual. Healthcare services, despite all the scientific and technological advances are still human services. Complications can occur, and human errors can happen. Whilst every means should be done to reduce such occurrences, learning from one's own or others' experience is one of the most effective ways to achieve continuous improvement.

The HA has rightly adopted an accountable and transparent policy of reporting all sentinel events and medical incidents, however, it requires the corresponding administrative and clinical leadership to embrace this policy with humility and confidence. There is no better approach than being responsive, honest and to show empathy in handling any adverse events, so that carer-patient relationships and trust can be maintained, and staff confidence and morale can be restored. I assure you that I will always stand by you when you are faced with such situations.

The theme of this year's Convention is "Happy Staff; Healthy People". I certainly agree that a happy and satisfied body of staff is likely to perform well, and able to contribute towards the health of our patients and community. However, as a healthcare professional myself, I always feel

the greatest satisfaction and sense of achievement are always derived from the ability to cure patients and restore them to health. This mindset must be common amongst many of our healthcare colleagues. Perhaps the theme should be appropriately interpreted as “Healthy People; Happy Staff”. In other words, we should provide an environment for our staff to excel in their professional competence, so that they can excel in caring for and treating their patients.

I know the Hospital Authority has been reviewing and making improvements in their Human Resources Policies, so that staff working conditions can be improved. I also expect a fair and just staff evaluation and career advancement system will enhance their commitment and dedication. Staff should be recognized for their clinical contributions, innovations, and teamwork. Promotion must be based on professional competence, research and commitment to teaching, leadership, ability to supervise, coach, and inspire compassion and comradeship within the team, and the demonstration of accountability and experience in voluntary or community services. That sounds like a lot, but I can assure you that there are many colleagues within the HA who already fulfill those criteria with ease.

A clinical team will perform best when the experienced and senior staff members work hand in hand with the young and inexperienced ones, together at the frontline. It is also a great pleasure to witness their growth and development, much like to watching one’s own children growing through their teens to young adulthood as their life skills develop.

I understand that every year this local audience expects me to announce plans and actions to be taken by the Government in further advancing our healthcare reform. I shall stress again that the Government is committed to an increase in funding for the Hospital Authority as well as for other health services and public health initiatives. In the next two financial years the Government will increase healthcare expenditure from its current 16.1% to 17%. I need to emphasize that much of this funding will be targeting new services in primary care, including mental health and dental services, purchasing cost-effective private services such as cataract surgery and management of chronic illnesses, preparation for more Traditional Chinese Medicine medical facilities, in addition to the

much needed investment in new technology and effective pharmaceutical products.

In the coming years, we shall also start to explore how to facilitate the professional development and regulation of healthcare professionals through various councils and boards, and consider the expansion of regulation on those allied health professions that are not being covered at present. Healthcare manpower will be the key to the sustainability of our service quality, and we shall also address manpower needs, training and career development strategies through collaborative consultation with stakeholders in the coming two years, so that we can be well prepared for the anticipated increase in service demands and capacity in the coming future.

Meanwhile, we have committed into action the elderly healthcare voucher scheme, the subsidy on vaccines for the young and the elderly, the setting up of the Primary Care Directory and related primary care reforms, the establishment of the universal Electronic Health Record System, the allocation of more land to the private sector for developing hospitals and health institutions, and increasing private-public partnerships. All the initiatives were funded by the Government through various channels, and these require the active and energetic participation of healthcare professionals to ensure success, along with monitoring by the public and our patients' advocates to provide valuable feedback to ensure that our precious public resources are well utilized.

A successful healthcare system requires the provision and co-ordination of many policies, institutions, and facilities. We embarked on a strategy 5 years ago, to position the HA as the anchor and benchmark for healthcare services for Hong Kong. Reforms in the private sector were also facilitated through the initiatives mentioned above. Another area which requires decision are the options for long term healthcare financing, and we shall be offering a recommendation to the public later this year, a supplementary financing scheme that involves voluntary insurance with a savings element. Similar to many countries undergoing healthcare financing reforms, it is necessary to build on the existing foundations, and to address the long term deficiencies and gaps by planning resources that are affordable by our community. We look forward to your input and

support for these proposals when the consultation is launched.

Twenty years is a long period of time either for a career, or for an organization. When I visited Beijing or many other Mainland cities and hospitals in 1990, they were still working with very basic equipment and technology. Now one can see many modern hospitals with the most up-to-date diagnostic and treatment facilities in all major cities throughout China, and the standards and outcomes of medical care have also greatly improved. The Mainland Government has also implemented its Healthcare Reform throughout the country, in cities as well as in rural areas. The experience of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority and the lessons learned will be a useful reference for our sister cities on the Mainland. I am also delighted to see many Hong Kong healthcare professionals are increasingly investing and contributing to the development and establishment of healthcare institutions on the Mainland, or joining partnerships with Mainland institutions. I would like to thank the Central Government for relaxing the criteria for our medical professions to work professionally under the CEPA arrangement so that they can play a role in our country's healthcare reform. I am sure these types of mutual contribution and partnership will provide more opportunities for professional advancement, resulting in a better quality of healthcare, and more opportunities for scientific research and innovations throughout China.

Colleagues and friends, Hong Kong is at a defining point for many opportunities at this moment. Progress and breakthroughs must be continually sought, so that we can have a sustainable and continually advancing healthcare system to keep the community healthy, and to ensure our future generations can continue to enjoy longevity and a lifestyle that is productive and free from health hazards and threats. The future will rely on the efforts of all of us.