

## **Indirect Harms to Older Adults under the COVID-19 Pandemic in Hong Kong – In the Views of Social Administration and Public Finance**

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The COVID-19 pandemic is a lesson for public decision makers to review their policies for older adults in unexpected disasters.

Under the “Laissez-faire” economic policy, as well as the characteristics of Hong Kong’s welfare regime reviewed in the literature, this region imposes relatively low direct tax rate, but limited social welfares. Under the COVID-19 pandemic, older adults may be the group suffers most.

Costs of public medical care in Hong Kong are low. “Eligible Persons” (Residents, children of residents or people approved by the government) pay just HKD100 per day (around USD13) to cover inpatient and most medical treatment.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the waiting list of medical services is unaffordable in some circumstance, “A person with cataracts can expect to wait 162 weeks to see an eye specialist at a hospital in the Kowloon East area of Hong Kong”,<sup>2</sup> for example, as the system is overloaded.

For the emergent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, patients of the coronavirus shall have high priority to be cared. However, people in other needs may suffer crowding out effect as hospitals make use of existed resources for the COVID-19 pandemic. People who cannot afford private medical care may become indirect victim.

Private medical institutions are an alternative for people who want urgent treatment,<sup>3</sup> but it is not possible option for people with limited saving.

The Hong Kong Social Security Allowance (SSA) Scheme may not be sufficient for older adults to undertake emergent needs, as the major concern is waiting time rather

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<sup>1</sup> Hospital Authority, Hong Kong SAR, *Fees and Charges*, [https://www.ha.org.hk/visitor/ha\\_visitor\\_index.asp?Content\\_ID=10045&Lang=ENG&Dimension=100&Parent\\_ID=10044&Ver=HTML](https://www.ha.org.hk/visitor/ha_visitor_index.asp?Content_ID=10045&Lang=ENG&Dimension=100&Parent_ID=10044&Ver=HTML) (last retrieved Feb-13, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Cheung and Emily Tsang, *Hong Kong’s health care system is teetering on the brink. What’s wrong with it, what can be done to fix it and will the budget provide some answers?*, South China Morning Post (Feb-26, 2019), <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/2187630/hong-kongs-health-care-system-teetering-brink> (last retrieved Feb-13, 2022)

<sup>3</sup> Xiangyi Kong et. al., *Overview of the health care system in Hong Kong and its referential significance to mainland China*, *Journal of the Chinese Medical Association* (Volume 78, Issue 10, October 2015) pp. 569-573.

than fee, as stated above. The tax refund may be least relevant for older adults without incomes.

This paper consists of 3 parts. First, the authors review the current social welfare environment for older adults. Second, we examine the impact by COVID-19 pandemic. Suggestions are provided in the third part.

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