



Review Article

Overview of the health care system in Hong Kong and its referential significance to mainland China

Xiangyi Kong, Yi Yang*, Jun Gao, Jian Guan, Yang Liu, Renzhi Wang, Bing Xing, Yongning Li, Wenbin Ma

Department of Neurosurgery, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, Beijing, China

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Abstract

Hong Kong's health system was established within the framework of a perfect market-oriented economic matrix, where there are wide-ranging social security and medical service systems. There are many differences in the economic foundations, social systems, and ideologies between Hong Kong and mainland China, therefore, it would probably be entirely impossible to copy Hong Kong's health care system mode. However, under the framework of *one country, two systems*, the referential significance of relevant concepts of Hong Kong's medical service system to mainland China cannot be ignored, and merits further study.

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Keywords: health care system; Hong Kong; mainland China; referential significance

1. Introduction

Hong Kong (HK) has been determined to be one of the *healthiest* places in the world.¹ Because of its early health education, professional health services, and well-developed health care and medication system, residents of Hong Kong enjoy a life expectancy of 85.9 years for women and 80 years for men.² The combined male/female life expectancy is the third highest in the world, and is accompanied by an infant mortality rate of 3.8 deaths/1000 births, the fourth lowest in the world.³ In addition, Hong Kong's public healthcare is virtually free to the individual. The USA, with a population of approximately 310 million, spent US\$408 billion on Medicare in 2012 and US\$246 billion on Medicaid; Hong Kong has a

population of approximately 7 million and set aside a budget for public healthcare spending of US\$5.8 billion in 2013. The US therefore spent and may continue to spend >2.5 times or 250% more on public healthcare per capita than does Hong Kong.⁴

Because of the extended duration of British colonial rule, the health care systems of HK have loosely mirrored the traditional National Health Service system in the UK.⁵ Where Hong Kong's provided programs and services differ from the characteristic National Health Service system in the UK can be found in Hong Kong's typical medical institution management mode. The Food and Health Bureau is responsible for forming policies and allocating resources to run Hong Kong's health services most efficaciously. This bureau also ensures that these policies are carried out effectively to protect and promote public health, provide lifelong holistic health care to every Hong Kong citizen, and to ensure that no one is denied adequate medical treatment due to lack of means, which is also the basic idea of HK's medical care. Today, the Food and Health Bureau has many divisions including Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, Department of

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* Corresponding author: Dr. Yi Yang, Department of Neurosurgery, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, 1, Shuaifuyuan Hutong of Dongcheng District, Beijing, 100730, China.

E-mail address: yangyipumch@sina.com (Y. Yang).

Health, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, and the HK Hospital Authority (HA). The Department of Health is responsible for healthcare policies and the provision of basic healthcare services, which provides its broad range of diverse services to residents of Hong Kong through various divisions, offices, and health centers.⁶

The HA is a statutory administrative body that manages all the public hospitals and health institutes in HK. It is board governed and under the auspices of the Secretary for Food and Health of the HK Government. The HA has been providing services to the public under a cluster-based structure since 1993.⁷ It currently manages 42 public hospitals and institutions, 48 specialist outpatient clinics, and 73 general outpatient clinics. These facilities are organized into seven hospital clusters, each of which comprises a mix of acute and convalescent or rehabilitation hospitals to provide a full range of healthcare services.⁸

2. Overview of medical and health services in HK

On the whole, HK leads the world in medical/health service systems. The HK government basically has achieved the goal that every citizen in HK can receive lifelong holistic health care, and no one will be denied adequate medical treatment due to lack of means.

2.1. Public medical institutions as the main body

The healthcare system of HK runs on a dual-track basis encompassing the public and the private sectors.⁹ Public healthcare is the cornerstone of our healthcare system, acting as the safety net for the whole community. Today, the public hospitals provide approximately 90% hospital medical service and 29% outpatient medical service throughout HK. The public hospital system of HK provides a comprehensive range of quality services at a very low level of user charges, at a flat rate of US\$13/d/bed, representing approximately 95% subsidies compared to the cost. The high rate of subsidy and quality healthcare services offered by public hospitals continue to attract a multitude of patients into the system.¹⁰

Additionally, the private healthcare sector provides personalized choices and more accessible services to those who are willing and may afford to pay for private healthcare services. This healthcare sector has been relatively active due to local demand and the increasing number of patients from the mainland. In 2010, private hospitals provided approximately 11% of hospital beds and served 21% of inpatients in HK.¹¹ These private hospitals and general outpatient clinics adopt the market-set price principle, independently setting prices based on the cost of medical services. Although the medical expenses are around 10 times higher than similar expenses in public hospitals, private medical institutions have particular advantages their public care counterparts lack. Public hospitals are usually overburdened with lengthy waiting lists and waiting time for services. Patients going to private facilities can directly see doctors whom they trust, and participate in the decision as to when to be hospitalized and

when to go undergo surgery. As the superior medical service and treatment mode, private medical institutions are often particularly attractive for patients who have sufficient economic capability.

2.2. Government increases financial input on public health care and provides high medical subsidies for individuals

For the past several years, HK's government budget for medical health services has increased year-to-year. HK has established a dual medical economy in which the government has been significantly involved in both the funding and provision of health services mainly through tax financing and personal insurance. For example, government subsidies account for a large amount of the revenue of public hospitals, therefore, patients' expenses in public hospitals are much lower than the corresponding medical cost. This entire system is able to function effectively in part because the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance Scheme is in place, enabling sizeable numbers of patients to be deemed eligible beneficiaries.

The government has also been promoting the development of private hospitals in recent years as part of its healthcare reform initiatives to improve the long-term sustainability of HK's healthcare system. In particular, the government has supported the expansion and redevelopment plans of existing private hospitals, as well as reserving four pieces of land for new private hospital development.¹²

3. Contemplating the health care system of HK and the relevance to mainland China

3.1. Hospital management mode

In mainland China, hospitals have always been managed by the central government's National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC) and health bureaus at local government level. Moreover, the NHFPC and health bureaus are still responsible for health inspection and enforcement. According to state regulations, NHFPC not only draws up healthcare policies, plans, standards, and technical specifications, and coordinates the healthcare reform and medical security system, but also directly formulates and carries out administrative measures for medical institutions and the medical services industry. This would include drawing up and implementing regulations and standards for medical institutions' services, medical techniques, healthcare quality, medical safety, and management measures for blood collection and supply agencies.¹³ The core behind this type of medical system is a mix of *rowing and steering*, governance, and administration. This is an obvious disadvantage of China's medical system and also poses one of the toughest problems for medical reform in mainland China. If health bureaus fail to manage or directly lead hospitals, the close relationship between the two will accordingly be diminished, which will facilitate the creation of

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