

Executive Summary

Hong Kong is renowned for its healthcare system, which operates on a dual-track basis comprising both the public and private sectors that complement each other. The public healthcare sector, subsidised by the Government, provides affordable and appropriate services to meet the needs of citizens. However, the healthcare system is overwhelmed due to the increasing ageing population and the growing number of chronic disease patients, all while facing a shortage of healthcare manpower. Thus, society must seek other measures to address these issues and achieve the goal of a stable and sustainable healthcare system.

The public and private healthcare systems in Hong Kong have always operated in parallel, with each accounting for 50% of the doctor manpower. Currently, 70% of Hong Kong residents use private healthcare for routine consultations. However, due to the higher costs of private healthcare, only about 10% of patients opt for private healthcare for specialty services, and inpatient medical care. Despite the Government's ongoing promotion of the Public-Private Partnership, to alleviate the pressure on the public healthcare sector, the results have been minimal. A large portion of Hong Kong's population still relies on public healthcare services, leading to an imbalance between the public and private healthcare sectors.

As interaction between Mainland China and Hong Kong becomes more frequent, the healthcare systems are aligning. To expand the choice of healthcare options for citizens, the HKSAR Government has launched various measures, including the "Pilot Scheme for Supporting Patients of the Hospital Authority in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area" and the "Elderly Health Care Voucher Greater Bay Area Pilot Scheme". Additionally, multiple measures have been introduced within the "eHealth+" five-year plan to facilitate cross-border healthcare services, promote collaboration, and share resources with the Mainland to link healthcare services in the Greater Bay Area.

Following the resumption of normal travel between the Mainland and Hong Kong, the consumption options of Hong Kong citizens has expanded from dining and entertainment to doctor appointments and health screenings.

According to data from the Public Hygiene and Health Commission of Shenzhen Municipality, Shenzhen has provided healthcare services for 700,000 visitors from Hong Kong, indicating a rising demand for cross-border healthcare services among Hong Kong citizens.

However, cross-border healthcare services are still in the initial phase, given various differences in healthcare systems and compliance. Challenges such as the sharing of health records and information; language barriers between patients and healthcare professionals; issues related to compensation and liabilities for medical malpractice, hinder the development of cross-border healthcare services and raise concerns.

To address the increasing trend in cross-border healthcare services, it is crucial to further improve support measures to meet medical needs. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the main factors that Hong Kong citizens consider when choosing medical services. It explores the experiences of Hong Kong residents with cross-border healthcare services, the factors that facilitate and hinder their access to such services, and their concerns. Ultimately this study provides viable recommendations for optimising cross-border medical care for people in Hong Kong.

Main Findings

- 1. The Hong Kong healthcare system is being overwhelmed due to shortages of healthcare manpower. Changes in the structure of Hong Kong's population have also led to increasing medical service needs. Cross-border healthcare services are able to relieve the strains on Hong Kong's healthcare system by providing more options for citizens.**
- 2. 30% of the respondents had visited the Mainland for cross-border healthcare services, indicating a rising demand for such services. Most of them chose to seek clinical services in Shenzhen. Dental services and health screenings have been the most commonly utilized by respondents in Mainland China. Some experts noted that some patients purchase medicine from the Mainland due to varying drug**

prices. Therefore, doctor appointments, health screenings, and purchasing medicine have become the medical services that Hong Kong citizens seek in the Mainland.

- 3. Cross-border healthcare has become one of the medical options for Hong Kong citizens due to enhanced healthcare services, lower costs, and shorter waiting times compared to those in Hong Kong.**
- 4. Various issues limit the provision of cross-border healthcare services, including unfamiliarity with Mainland healthcare services, concerns about healthcare quality, differences in culture and language, and a lack of clear information.**
- 5. Despite an increasing number of Hong Kong residents accessing cross-border healthcare services, some residents are concerned about these services. Differences in regulations and supervision, qualification registration, compensation and liabilities, acceptance of medical reports, and follow-up care require attention.**
- 6. Although Hong Kong's healthcare system is trustworthy, the significant financial burden poses a current challenge. Therefore, it is essential to find measures to help build a stable and sustainable healthcare system.**

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion above, this study will put forward recommendations for developing cross-border healthcare services and enhancing the overall quality of healthcare services.

- 1. Establish a dedicated task force to coordinate cross-border healthcare**

To strengthen cooperation in cross-border healthcare, the research suggests establishing a “Hong Kong/Guangdong Expert Group on Cross-border Healthcare” aimed at coordinating related issues and facilitating communication. The main duties include:

- (a.) Managing Complaints: The research highlighted that most respondents are concerned about compensation and liability in cases of medical malpractice, as well as related regulations. Therefore, providing a dedicated channel for complaints can ensure that individuals receive the help they need.**
- (b.) Strengthening Communication During Crises: This involves preparing plans for medical emergencies, evaluating public health risks, and setting up alert systems.**
- (c.) Exchanging Information: This is especially in relation to data on rare diseases and cancer. Given that the number of patients with rare diseases is higher than in Hong Kong, more available data can be referred to by experts for discussing appropriate treatment suggestions and further enhancing healthcare communication.**

2. Integrating information by establishing a “Cross-border Healthcare Information Platform” to enhance accuracy and accessibility

The research found that most respondents are unfamiliar with Mainland healthcare services, which affects their confidence. Even those who have used these services admitted to not being well-informed. Additionally, as most information sources rely on word of mouth, accessibility is limited, and the accuracy is questionable, as much of it is unofficial and lacks fact-checking.

Therefore, establishing a platform to disseminate information can ensure consistency. Through this platform, the public can access the latest measures related to cross-border healthcare and information about the Mainland healthcare system. Furthermore, the platform could include mapping and positioning functions to locate Tier III Class A Mainland hospitals, as well as name-search and filtering capabilities to provide information on hospitals.

3. Building a corpus of medical language to address the language barriers and optimise the eHealth app

The healthcare language adopted by professionals in the Mainland and Hong Kong varies, affecting the understanding of reports. Some case studies mention concerns that professionals in Hong Kong may not understand the content, which can impact diagnoses if reports are presented in Chinese.

Thus, it is crucial to develop a compatible medical language system to ensure accurate readability. Referring to overseas experiences, the electronic cross-border health services of the European Union support more than 20 languages to facilitate EU residents accessing cross-border healthcare services. Additionally, the United States of America has established the Unified Medical Language System to manage medical terminology. Recently, the Mainland has also created a corpus of medical terminology in multiple languages, such as the English-Chinese Bilingual Corpus of Medical Language (Chinese: 醫學英漢雙語平行語料庫) by Southern Medical University, and MMedC by Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

As the eHealth app allows users to upload documents from medical institutions outside of Hong Kong, research suggests collaboration between medical schools in Hong Kong and the Mainland to develop and optimise the functionality of eHealth. The optimisation would ensure

that the corpus is available in eHealth, supports language differences, encourages the exchange of health records, and facilitates follow-up access without hindrance.

4. Accelerating the optimisation of the Health Care Voucher to expand options for medical institutions and better cater to the needs of the elderly

The HKSAR Government launched the scheme in 2015 to enable eligible Hong Kong elderly residents to use health care vouchers for outpatient service fees at designated clinics and departments of the HKU-SZ Hospital, which has been formally adopted since 2019. Although the Government announced plans to expand the scope of the Health Care Voucher programme to nine municipalities in the Greater Bay Area, coverage still has not been extended to Zhuhai, Foshan, Huizhou, Jiangmen, and Zhaoqing.

The policy principle of the Elderly Medical Voucher Scheme is to enable seniors to appropriately use primary healthcare services, aiming to prevent diseases and manage health. The Government allows these vouchers to be used in the Greater Bay Area, providing greater convenience and flexibility for eligible Hong Kong seniors living in mainland cities of the Greater Bay Area, as well as allowing them to use cross-border medical services in response to their urgent healthcare needs.

Currently, there are over 500,000 Hong Kong citizens living in the Greater Bay Area, including approximately 88,000 seniors. It is recommended that the Government expedites the optimisation of the Elderly Health Voucher to cover more service pilot programmes, enabling Hong Kong seniors to use their vouchers at more medical institutions to support their long-term healthcare needs.