Health-care reforms back on agenda as H1N1 fears ease

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Mary Ann Benitez

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With the human swine flu (H1N1) pandemic taking a predictable course, there is no more reason to further delay consultations on health-care financing, Secretary for Food and Health York Chow Yat-ngok says.

Chow yesterday said the consultation on voluntary medical insurance with a savings element will begin by the middle of next year.

"The more we delay this issue, the more serious it will be because we are facing an aging population as well as escalating cost of health care," he said.

A voluntary scheme is more acceptable to the public, and regulating it will be a good first step to protect policyholders, he said.

At an earlier symposium, Chow said an electronic health record-sharing system launched earlier this month and set to be completed in 2013 will underpin the new patient-centered approach in primary health care.

He said the government will spend HK$150 million in the next three years to develop primary care.

Chief Executive Donald Tsang said in his policy address on Wednesday that the territory-wide record-sharing system can save medical costs, minimize errors and safeguard patients’ health.

However symposium panelist Lam Tai-ling, Hong Kong University chair professor and head of the department of community medicine, lamented that funding is lopsided toward genetics, infectious diseases and other high-profile specialist research "whose findings have international impact."

As a result, research on public health, such as tobacco control, has been poorly funded, he added.

Hospital Authority director (strategy and planning) Lo Su-wui said medical graduates also prefer to train in specialties with high reputation, rather than go to family medicine.

Meanwhile, the activity of swine flu declined for a second week, the latest figures from the Centre for Health Protection show.

A total of 4,043 patients went to designated flu clinics in the seven days ending October 10 compared with 5,561 the previous week.