

CADENZA Symposium 2008: Successful Ageing
Keynote Address by Dr the Hon Leong Che-hung,
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May I begin by thanking the organizers for asking me to speak to this august gathering of experts in elderly policy and care both locally and from overseas. Let me also congratulate the Jockey Club for instrumenting this symposium as part of CADENZA project. With the backing of the Jockey Club, and a substantial funding, I am sure the elders in HK will benefit.

2. The theme of the symposium is “successful ageing”. I thought I would like to kick off the discussion by going through with you possible factors that determine successful ageing in HK basing on my experiences of coming into contact with the elderly population in the last 3 years and the organizations that look after them; and perhaps, my personal experiences as an elder myself.

3. In a few days time, the Chief Executive of the HKSAR will be delivering his Policy Address which will determine the way he would

govern HK in the years to come. Few would doubt that issues of the elderly will be among the high priority. In the presence of inflation, and up till now a surplus economy, the public will expectingly be demanding an increase in financial support for the seniors. While it is the responsibility of any responsible government to ensure a “dignify” living for those who in the past have served HK, yet few would disagree that public money should be spent “mainly on those who need it most”; and that any form of government spending should also take into account of sustainability, especially during times of lean. Alan Greenspan once said, “Policymakers should err on the side of prudence when considering new budget entitlement initiatives. Programs can always be expanded in the future should the resources for them become available, but they cannot easily be cut back if resources later fall short of commitments.” That said, is financial subsidy the all and be all to “successful living”?

4. Since I took up the helm of the Elderly Commission I have been moved by a few observations and I like to share them with you.

5. I was struck by some fairly healthy, and to a certain extent,

able bodied elderly males idling away in public parks reading outdated newspapers. When asked why they did not join programmes provided by elderly day care centres, their replies were that they do not want to make plastic flowers nor watch day in and day out Chinese “golden oldies” movies. They want to learn something useful so that they can be part of the society.

6. I had the benefit of walking up 7 flights of stairs to visit an elderly couple in the old town of Kowloon City. The husband was in his mid 80’s somewhat physically disabled. The wife was an active late 70’s, and if you think climbing 7 flights of steers is an achievement, you can think again. This lady does it at least 4 times a day, doing the needed shopping, collecting cardboard boxes and sell them as a means of improving her daily subsistence. She refused to be put on welfare (CSSA). Her biggest enjoyment was to see volunteers from the district coming to visit her and help her with odd and ends in the flat. Every evening a young man in the neighborhood cafeteria would cycle around to distribute left over soup to her and her likes.

7. A couple of months ago I visited a singleton elderly lady in her late 80's in a remote rural area of Yuen Long unapproachable by public transport. She lives alone in a corrugated thatched hut in the company of 3 dogs. She is on welfare (CSSA) support but decline to ask for more as she would like to divert the limited public resource to those in genuine need. However, she would also like to have more home help and support from the community.

8. When I visit Elderly Homes, a common question that I like to ask the boarders, as a means of assessing standard of Elderly Institutions, is whether they are happy and satisfied. Most of the time their answers are positive, but would always add, that they would still prefer to age at home with or near their children and grandchildren.

9. On a personal basis, I am somewhat upset by the general public's image of elderlies. The common symbol of a senior citizen is a white hair, wrinkled face person partially bald, with a bent back holding a walking stick being assisted on crossing a road. I think I do not need that yet. Elderlies are thus portrayed as weak, frail, perhaps a burden,

which by today's standard they are NOT.

10. It is on these basis that the Elderly Commission believed that some major factors for successful ageing should includes:

- ◆ Proper pre-retirement preparations;
- ◆ Changing the image of the seniors;
- ◆ Promote active ageing;
- ◆ Promote an elderly friendly community;
- ◆ Promote intergeneration harmony so as to reestablish the core values of a family; and
- ◆ Involve the elderlies and not “ignore them”.

11. What have we done? No we have not done everything nor have we even attempted to do all. Yet we have pioneered a few areas, hopefully given time, might achieve some of the above factors.

12. We have started an Elderly Academy. This is a school based learning allowing our seniors not only a chance to really learn but a sense

of going “back to school”. Participating primary and secondary schools will be contributing their premises after regular school hours and during weekends. The students of these schools will become “teachers” teaching elders enrolled either directly or through elderly institutions and non governmental welfare organizations. The curriculae will consist of a mandatory session on health education and healthy living. Other subjects are discussed and agreed by the ‘students’ the “teacher” together. It might be a surprise to note that working with computer, personal health care are the most commonly chosen topics. This scheme thus have achieved a few objectives.

- ◆ Ensure that our elders remain active;
- ◆ Promote their social relationship by enlarging their social circle and thus enhance their confidence and image;
- ◆ Promote cross sectional cooperation between the education sector and welfare sector;
- ◆ Induce better understanding between the old and young – in short promote intergeneration harmony, leading to appreciation of core family values.

13. Starting off with 32 schools, we have now 78 schools. The tertiary institutes have also showed their enthusiasm. Some 7 out of 11 local universities are involved. They provide a wide spectra of programmes ranging from specifically organized interest class to elders, to proper sub degree courses; to formally allowing the elders to sit in at regular university degree sessions. As of today, their should be over 10,000 elders in the primary and secondary schools and about 1,000 who yearn to taste university life when they were young but were deprived are now enrolled as university students.

14. I am aware that the concept of the university of the 3rd Age, which is essentially a peer learning group, has been well established in many parts of the world, in particular Australia. Ours is perhaps unique in that other there offering a university life for our elders, we have also instilled a real sense of cooperation between the generations, where elder students study side by side with the younger regulars. This would no doubt promote inter-generation understanding and harmony in the long run.

15. Nothing is more effective than peer inducement and peer support. This applies particularly to the elderlies. It is on these understanding that the Elderly Commission has started pilot projects in all the districts in Hong Kong – Pilot Neighborhood Active Ageing Project. Using the neighborhood as platforms, nongovernmental organizations enter into partnership with different sectors to train up volunteers to organize activities regularly for the elderly and to pay visits to singletons elders to strengthen neighborhood support and a sense of belonging in a neighborhood setting. Today we have 19 such neighbourhood projects across the territory reaching out to every sector of the community, including private and public estates, old tenement buildings and rural areas. We have witness examples of formerly “shut off elderlies” opening up to neighbors, joining peer groups and even taking a lead to induce others to participate. The project is extended to a “Caring for Elders” concept aiming to promote care for elders and abuse prevention through neighbor support net works. Elderly abuse, of which we have no exact figures, are by no means rare, this project will tackle elder abuse through a three prong approach, namely education (through the Elder

Academy Network) prevent and support (through setting up elder caring group). 18 neighbourhood projects should be up and running later this month. All in all, the elders play the active role answering to the concept of “utilize” them and do not “ignore” than.

16. For those in the audience, who belong to a more mature age, the project might bring back the nostalgia of “under the lion rock” culture where filial piety reigns supreme; where respect of the elders is a convention; where neighborhood harmony, and friendship is the norm. As a elder myself, let me say this to you, it was this culture and spirit that bound Hong Kong together to emerge a winner from the doldrums of the 50’s and the 60’s to become what we are today.

17. Let us set the priority right, Elderly Commission is of the view that the 3 pillars for supporting elders in Hong Kong are to facilitate them – to age **happily** at their own home; to age **actively** in their community; to age **gracefully** while receiving the inevitable long term care in care homes. We need to put our act close to our mouth in all these aspects.

18. Ladies and gentlemen as a health care personnel I would have failed my duty if I do not stress that. “No ageing could be successful unless our elders are also healthy”.

19. In short not only should they be taught the major personal responsibility to keep healthy they must also be provided with proper to effective medical care when they get sick. At the risk of being accused of “blowing our own trumpet” I have to proudly boast that Hong Kong has perhaps one of the best public provided health care system where “nobody will be denied of care because of lack of means”. For a mere HK\$100.00 a day you are offered the state of the art investigations and cutting edge treatment. Furthermore over 60% are either totally or partially exempted from payment mostly amongst the elderlies. The confidence the elderly have on the Hong Kong public health care system makes it an impediment for those who consider venturing to spend their “golden age” north in the Mainland. Some who did are making a return.

20. But such social services are expensive and a strain on this

public purse. As the society ages, such health care cost will increase exponentially. Elderlies have a much higher incidence of chronic illness and when they do it is invariably multipathology. Most illnesses tends to concertino in the last two years of ones life.

21. Figures and statistics in Hong Kong has shown that public health expenditure will increase by 3.9 times between 2004 and 2033, when GDP will only grow by 1.7 times during the same period. As a result, public health expenditure as a share of GDP will increase from 2.9% in 2004 to 5.5% in 2033. Assuming that total public expenditure will be kept below 20% of GDP, the share of public health expenditure as a share of total public expenditure will increase from 14.7% in 2004 to 27.3% in 2033. Yet such social service a vital and, Hong Kong cannot do without.

22. At the beginning of my address – I did stress that any government spending and elderly service is an important part of it, should not lose sight of the need for sustainability. Since health care service is an integral path of essential elderly care, it is obvious that the budget for

elderly care must be phenomenal and it will need a hat-trick to make it sustain.

23. Ladies and Gentlemen, for the last 15 minutes or so I have posed many questions and problems in relation to elder care, perhaps even a few time bombs. Some, the Elderly Commission has made suggestions to tackle, many I do not know how to defuse. I will have to defer to the experts today to share with us their wisdom.

24. The world is ageing, we have to find ways to face the challenge, we have no choice. For as Alan Greenspan said “Demography is Destiny”.

25. Thank you.