Impact of COVID-19 on elderly care

To the Editor,

As of April 2020, >95% of COVID-19 deaths are among older people aged >60 years, and nearly half of the deaths occurred in those aged ≥80 years.1 Older adults generally have underlying health problems (such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and respiratory illness) that weaken the immune system and increase the risk of COVID-19 infection.2 Outbreaks may occur in elderly care centres and spread to the community.3

On 7 July 2020, the first confirmed case in Hong Kong involving elderly centres occurred at Tsz Wan Shan Kong Tai Care for the Aged Centre. The confirmed cases nearly double within 2 days, involving 23 older adults. As of 17 July 2020, there were 44 confirmed cases.4 Outbreak also appeared in elderly centres at Kwai Chung, Tuen Mun, and Sham Shui Po districts.

To reduce the risk of infection, the Elderly Services Association of Hong Kong and Centre for Health Protection5 recommended six measures: (1) prohibiting family members from visiting and older people from going out; (2) monitoring of older people’s health while going to public hospitals for regular checking. If follow-up consultation and medication are required, a visiting doctor should be arranged; (3) testing of COVID-19 virus for staff; (4) minimising group activities or gatherings to maintain social distancing, and strictly limiting the proportion of older people to staff in group activities to 1:1 or 1:2; (5) spraying an anti-virus coating;6 and (6) wearing a face mask and washing hands with alcohol-based sanitiser frequently.

These measures may result in social isolation and loneliness, increasing the risk of anxiety and depression. To mitigate this, family members should utilise social media and video communication applications to maintain social connections. These measures may also lead to poor physical and mental health, resulting in increased blood pressure, heart disease, and obesity and diminished immune system functioning, as well as Alzheimer’s disease.7 Older people can be taught Tai-Chi and Baduanjin to relax and improve the respiratory movement, rhythm, and pattern and to enhance the immune system and physical and mental health to prevent anxiety and depression.8

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