

# Urgent action needed for the mentally vulnerable

Growing cases of mental health problems among HK’s youths and the elderly are worrying. Relief programs and counseling services must provide professional help for them, **Stefan Dalton** writes.

Impressive statements were made in the 2019-20 Budget by the financial secretary on Feb 27. But where are the specific plans to address our mental health crises?

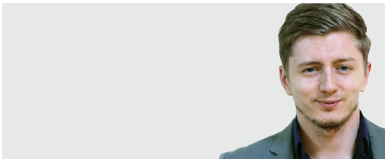
The budget outlined great emphasis on improving the physical aspects of health in the young, elderly, and individuals with disabilities; improving facilities; raising public awareness of disease prevention and self-health management. But nothing was specifically mentioned to improve public awareness of mental health, which continues to take a back seat.

With new cases of clinical depression emerging every day, the latest statistics showed over 300,000 diagnoses of major depression in Hong Kong, with symptoms continuously growing in the young. Additionally, a recent survey found 60 percent of school children exhibiting symptoms of depression and another survey by Hong Kong Polytechnic University found 40 percent of students suffering from anxiety. The question is, why do statistics show higher levels of depression in the youth of Hong Kong, compared with other well-developed economies? So how can the budget address the obvious need? And where is the strategy to tackle this ticking time bomb?

Fortunately, the government recognizes the epidemic as it announced plans to tackle mental health issues in secondary schools by introducing stress relief programs. The budget proposes placing two social workers in each of more than 460 secondary schools. With the pressures of burdensome and questionable loads of homework, this seems to be a move in the right direction.

But I wonder if we could provide this service to primary school children as well, simultaneously reviewing the amount of their standard homework, with a view to freeing them up for more wholesome after-school activities, be it sports, hobbies and other personal interests which might help develop their individual potential, while adding more color, diversity and fun to their young lives.

The latest findings in the education sector attest to the educational and developmental value of play. Rote learning and more homework may cram more data into a young mind. But what good will it do if they



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lack the creativity, imagination and the ability to think outside the box to make the best use of what they already know. For that to happen, they need the time and space to cultivate them.

The budget also announced new welfare facilities for child day-care, special needs education and other care services are to be increased. However, it’s important to understand what these services are. I wonder if counseling services are on the agenda. Shockingly, there are around 70 suicides among children a year. The services that must be introduced without further delay are suicide awareness programs in schools.

With the continuous pressures of school life, suicide in children has become a serious concern in Hong Kong. Are there budgets to place interventions in schools and train teachers on suicide prevention in children?

There is said to be a plan to set up centers for divorced families to allow family members to seek help more easily. I hope they are staffed by counselors with specialized training.

While there is a perceptible greater willingness among certain sectors of the community to talk about depression, mental health continues to be stigmatized in Chinese culture. My hope is that more respected public figures and government officials would help remedy this by talking openly about mental illness as a treatable condition and not a family disgrace.

While there are also budgets in place to create and improve residential care services for the elderly, with the hiring of more social workers and physiotherapists, where is the specific concern for their mental health? Depression in the elderly is a serious and, unfortunately, common public health concern. It’s also essential to provide services to take care of the psychological well-being of our elderly.

For instance, Alzheimer’s disease is a leading killer among senior citizens. In fact, its death toll is higher than breast and prostate cancer combined. What campaigns of awareness of Alzheimer’s disease and types of dementia do we currently have in place?

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The Hospital Authority said there were nearly 50,000 bookings for each psychiatrist in 2018. While “urgent” cases are seen within a week on Hong Kong Island, waiting times could be up to over a year for “stable” cases; In Kowloon, “stable” cases can take up to 131 weeks to be seen. I can’t help wondering if we can hire more psychiatrists and psychologists, how many suicides could we have prevented each year. And how the lives of our elderly, the mentally vulnerable and our emotionally disturbed young people could be improved.

We should have the political will to do the honorable and responsible thing now because we do have the budget for it!

TO THE POINT

STAFF WRITER

## Worries over investment law unnecessary

Some Hong Kong-based business people have expressed concern over the new Foreign Investment Law, which was approved by the National People’s Congress at its annual session in Beijing earlier this month. Interestingly, what worries them is not any provision in the law that deals specifically with investments by Hong Kong businesses, but rather the contrary — it does not mention Hong Kong at all throughout. Apart from the obvious that they are not seen or treated as “foreign investors”, the Foreign Investment Law seems to have made some members of the business community here feel left out. Such sentiments are understandable but unnecessary, because there are other legally binding safeguards to protect Hong Kong businesses’ interests on the mainland.

The Foreign Investment Law is widely considered to be the ultimate answer to concerns over legal protection for foreign investment at the national level, or the lack of it. That is why some Hong Kong-based businesses felt neglected somehow when they found out the new law is not for them. However, that’s because they forgot that Hong Kong businesses are already covered by many favorable policies and rules, such as the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, known as CEPA. The Foreign Investment Law will not replace any of those existing safeguards until the central authorities say otherwise. As a matter of fact, Premier Li Keqiang addressed the above-mentioned

concerns after the NPC session by saying to the effect that the new law is actually a blessing for Hong Kong, and will serve as a reference code in legal matters concerning investments by Hong Kong businesses and residents when necessary.

Wang Zhimin, director of the Liaison Office of the Central People’s Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, pointed out at a meeting here on Wednesday that the CEPA between the central government and the HKSAR will remain effective and renewed every year as it has been since 2003. Like the Individual Visit Scheme introduced the same year, CEPA is designed to help Hong Kong recover faster from the devastating impact of the SARS epidemic, and has been instrumental in shoring up Hong Kong’s economy against the global financial crisis of 2008 till this day. Besides, the central government has promised measures to institutionalize national treatment for permanent residents of Hong Kong and Macao in a gradual and orderly fashion.

The Foreign Investment Law is a concrete step in China’s development strategy through continued reform and opening-up. Hong Kong has played a unique and irreplaceable role in the reform and opening-up campaign and benefited from it tremendously since it started in 1978. There’s no reason whatsoever to question Hong Kong’s status or role in national development moving forward.

## GBA SNAP

### Paying homage



Dafo Temple or literally “big buddha temple” is a grand buddhist temple in Guangzhou with more than a thousand years. A stream of visitors, either buddhist devotees or otherwise, make a pilgrimage to the sacred place each year. PARKER ZHENG / CHINA DAILY

# Migrant domestic workers can contribute more than we expect

Firstly, local NGO Enrich HK, working with Experian, launched their landmark report on the economic contributions of migrant domestic workers (MDWs) to Hong Kong’s economy. The report calculated the real value of MDWs’ work in Hong Kong by taking the amount of time spent on various different tasks, then multiplying it by the local market value and then multiplying that figure by 385,000 — the total number of MDWs in the SAR. The final number was quite remarkable — HK\$71.2 billion. Given how the majority of the work done by MDWs is “unseen”, the contribution is even more remarkable.

Secondly, across town, Dr Lam Ching-choi, chairman of the Elderly Commission, took to the air waves to deny media reports that MDWs would become core workers in the government’s elder care institutions which were due to be expanded after the recent budget announcement. These rumors came about because of the pilot scheme of the Social Welfare Department to train 300 MDWs on how to care for frail elderly people, free of charge. In this case, it was a case of two-plus-two equalling five.

Dr Lam was quite right to state that MDWs could not be relied upon as a key manpower resource for government elder care institutions for two reasons — most are not trained properly to adequately



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manage long-term, chronic care needs; and, secondly, the current legal and immigration framework would simply not permit them to undertake such work.

However, this is not to say that this should be the case in perpetuity.

The experience from almost every other advanced economy is that the care sector, and the elderly care sector, in particular, always struggles with manpower. While hugely rewarding, the work is often poorly paid and not highly regarded and appreciated by society. This experience tells us that as institutional care expands in Hong Kong, which it inevitably will, there will be a need to think in an innovative way to derive the necessary manpower. Again, in common with many other places, migration will likely be a key, if not a primary, source of manpower.

But, of course, the role of caregivers in institutions will only ever represent a small proportion of the care economy in Hong Kong. All would admit that it’s better for the elderly to “age in place”, to remain at home for as long as possible. This is better for the health and well-being of the individual and, of course, better for the public purse. However, in order to ensure that people are able to stay out of institutions for as long as possible, they must be able to access the appropriate levels of care.

The Social Welfare Department’s pilot

program is a very welcome first step in offering the requisite skills training to MDWs to allow them to be central to this concept of “ageing in place”. As complex, chronic care needs develop, and as the demand for such services increases over time, it’s crucial that the training is expanded in both coverage and scope. The professionalization of the care sector, starting with MDWs, represents a win-win for all. The upskilling of MDWs will not only allow them to offer better care, but will also give them the opportunity to develop their own businesses upon leaving Hong Kong (which could, in turn, develop a snowball effect of the development of skills training in their home countries). Better skills can also translate into better salaries which, combined with financial literacy and inclusion projects, would lead to better lives for women and their families across the region.

It may also be time to revisit (once more) the immigration framework for MDWs, and to explore the extent to which care can be “shared” between families. This is a rational response to varying degrees of need. For some individuals and families, an hour’s support per day could make all the difference, while for others, round-the-clock intensive care is required. Yet, both these two extreme types of citizens would be subject to the same require-

ment of an MDW living-in and having only one employer, and probably pay the same salary as well. Developing a more flexible framework, which enhances accountability for both employers and employees, is surely a priority. The current system is designed around the relatively homogeneous care needs of children in terms of time and skill level. As we transition toward a model where care is more directed toward our older population, which has much more heterogeneous care needs, we surely need to examine whether our current immigration system is fit for this purpose.

This then returns us to the contribution of MDWs to the Hong Kong economy. While I was surprised by the size of the number, I would argue this is a gross underestimate. Once we take into account the amount of time which is freed up as MDWs take responsibility for child-care, their complete contribution to the economy is surely much greater. More importantly, if we take in the costs of the necessary development of the specialized elderly care sector, in terms of both institutions and domestic support, as well as personal social services if provided either by the government or the market, I suspect the costs saved by relying on the MDW model would make this HK\$71 billion look like small change.

