

COMMENTHK

Public scrutiny needed for Hong Kong education sector

Paul Yeung says naming educators disciplined for misconduct is necessary to give parents actionable information and to protect the image of good teachers

The anti-government campaign last year not only battered Hong Kong's hard-earned achievements, but also raised a general concern about the future of the city, specifically its economic development and young talent pool. According to government statistics, between June 2019 and April 2020, among the more than 8,000 persons arrested during the anti-government campaign, about 2,000 were tertiary students, along with 1,300 underage youth, who are estimated to be predominantly school pupils. That is to say, students account for about 40 percent of the total arrestees. This staggering number not only is a worrying sign for the future of Hong Kong, but also gives rise to questions about what has gone wrong in Hong Kong's education.

An old Chinese proverb has it that a good teacher is a strict preacher. However, two sets of figures reveal that many Hong Kong teachers have failed miserably in their preaching. To start with, about 10 tertiary educators and 100 primary and secondary teachers are among those arrested in last year's social unrest. Furthermore, from June last year to August this year, the Education Bureau received 247 complaints of professional misconduct by teachers regarding their purported involvement in protests. These two sets of numbers reflect the increasingly severe impact of politicization on society, which did not spare even school campuses. While it is difficult to prove the correlation between the illegal behavior of teachers and students, the professional misconduct many educators demonstrated in their involvement in political activities is a real concern.

At present, the Education Bureau has an established mechanism to handle such issues. If the above educators are prosecuted, regardless of the verdict of the court, the Education Bureau will review court documents and related materials to determine whether they are guilty of professional misconduct, along with reassessing their eligibility for teaching. As for teachers who are the subject of a misconduct complaint, the



Paul Yeung
The author is senior research officer of the One Country Two Systems Research Institute.

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Education Bureau will also investigate the cases and take follow-up actions such as verbal reminder, advisory letter, letter of condemnation, warning letter, or even revoke their teacher registration in accordance with the Education Ordinance. Nevertheless, the repercussions of last year's massive riots have exposed the flaws and inadequacies of this complaint handling mechanism, which has failed to keep up with the times.

The transparency in handling misconduct complaints against teachers, for instance, fails to meet public expectations. According to the latest statistics from the Education Bureau, as of early October, it has reviewed approximately 204 complaints, of which 71 were substantiated and being followed up, and 73 are deemed unsubstantiated. While the investigation was in progress, the public had little idea on how the bureau determined the justifiability of the complaints. Among the 71 justified complaints, 21 have been issued a letter of condemnation, 12 issued a warning letter, 19 issued an advisory letter, and 18 issued a verbal reminder. Similarly, although the public are stakeholders in

education and were concerned about the misconduct cases, since the hearing processes were conducted behind closed doors, their right to know was greatly undermined.

In addition, the public only know the number of teachers who have been found guilty of serious professional misconduct, having been convicted by the court, having received a letter of condemnation or warning letter from the Education Bureau, or even having the revocation of their teacher registration. However, information such as their names and the schools involved remains undisclosed. This old practice might have been intended to protect the teachers and schools involved, but the downside is that the public can only rely on media or hearsay to learn about the details. This inadequate right to know is more likely to encourage the emergence of fake news, which could unfairly affect the professional image of the majority of good teachers.

In addition to the top-down management by the education authority, it is therefore also necessary and justified for the education sector to be placed under public scrutiny or supervision. Take medical practitioners as a typical profession for example. The Medical Council holds public hearings when it deals with the disciplinary issues of doctors, and discloses the name of doctors who are accused of serious professional misconduct. Such transparency is put in place to ensure public trust in the medical profession. The social function of teachers is no less important than that of doctors. Especially in recent years, the community is aware that there have been a large number of misconduct complaints involving teachers who expressed hatred, profanity and other improper remarks, or prepared inappropriate teaching materials, or allegedly violated the law. Since these educators teach in secondary and primarily schools, or even kindergartens, it is reasonable for the public to know who the "black sheep" are.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Mika Chan and Bill Chan

Enhanced telemedicine will be a big health boon to residents

Telemedicine has seen unprecedented growth since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Greater access to healthcare services, especially primary care, is now available to complement in-person consultations in the face of social-distancing measures in many countries. Once struggling to adapt to unfamiliar consultation settings, patients and healthcare professionals have now discovered additional benefits of telemedicine that include enhanced convenience and reduced risk of healthcare-facility-acquired infections.

The first record of telemedicine usage dates to 1879, when renowned medical journal *The Lancet* reported a physician ruling out croup, a common respiratory disease in children, by listening to coughs over the telephone. Over the past century, progress on the speed of data transmission has made video consultations increasingly real-time; and countries like Australia and China have successfully brought healthcare expertise in cities to countryside residents, bridging the rural-urban divide in healthcare provision. Today, COVID-19 has served as the catalyst for the exponential expansion of telemedicine, but what of telemedicine in the post-pandemic era?

The advantages of telemedicine are multifold. Decreased logistical delays and easy-to-use platforms for patients increase their accessibility to healthcare services. At the touch of a button, diabetic patients can now update doctors on their self-monitored blood sugar levels on an app interface. Concurrently, doctors can provide advice and prescribe medications anytime, anywhere. Notably, telemedicine will be particularly advanta-

Telemedicine services should be further developed and expanded to increase Hong Kong residents' access to healthcare services, and now is conceivably the right time to move forward in this arena. It is promising to see initial steps for telemedicine development in Hong Kong, although much needs to be done for successful integration into the local health system.

geous for groups challenged by limited mobility, such as the elderly, the chronically ill and those living in remote areas.

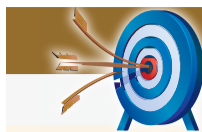
Just like diabetes, many other chronic diseases can also be managed by telemedicine. A survey of chronic autoimmune, neural and respiratory patients in the United States revealed that 79 percent cited "ongoing care and monitoring" as the top reason for teleconsulting with a specialist during COVID-19. The unique service offering of telemedicine that enables follow-up visits to be free from time and location constraints, enabling doctors to closely observe patients' medication side effects, exercise habits and sleeping pat-

terns, is perhaps a main contributory factor to this observation.

Such convenience, however, is not without drawbacks. A pertinent limitation of telemedicine is its restriction on the use of patient assessment tools that require physical application, such as swabs or certain blood tests. This inadequacy may lead to inaccurate clinical judgement, delayed treatment and other unfavorable outcomes. The effectiveness of telemedicine is also limited by the health literacy of the general population, since the public needs to be fully informed of the rapidly evolving technology for effective communication with healthcare professionals.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US has actively implemented various telemedicine policies targeted at lower socioeconomic populations to improve uptake and usage of this technology. As an example, the US Department of Veterans Affairs spent \$39 million to procure electronic equipment to combat the digital divide for homeless or less-economically capable veterans. To further telemedicine development, US President Donald Trump announced investments in rural communications infrastructure in August. While telemedicine was already on a slow but steady rise before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, these policy actions are thought to have at least partially contributed to the rapid rise in usage observed since the start of the pandemic. A staggering 85 percent of US healthcare practices now employ telemedicine services compared to 6 percent before the pandemic.

Hong Kong's adoption of telemedicine has been relatively slow. While telemedi-



TO THE POINT

STAFF WRITER

Perseverance, sacrifice needed to head off new virus outbreak

Health experts who have, over the past several days, warned of a new wave of COVID-19 infections looming on the horizon are not in any way alarmists. After a short lull following Hong Kong society's successfully overcoming the third wave of the pandemic, the coronavirus flexed its muscles again over the past week, causing a spike in cases of new infections.

The health authority reported 18 new COVID-19 cases on Thursday, much higher than the 11 cases reported on Wednesday. Much more worrying is that the cases with unknown sources of infection also increased, along with the emergence of more clusters around town, which has fueled concerns about local outbreaks.

The increase in infections of unknown sources makes it all the more difficult to cut off the infection chains and stop the spread of the virus.

Given the high odds of a new wave of infections during the coming winter season, the health authority should plan ahead and have a comprehensive anti-pandemic strategy in place that could be implemented immediately at the first sign of a new outbreak.

It is expected that the health authority can do a better job at coming up with a new strategy to cope with a future outbreak after drawing lessons from its experience, including blunders in fight-

ing off the previous waves of infections. It is also expected to handle the situation with great facility.

The latest rebound in confirmed cases came after a number of social-distancing measures were gradually eased in response to the receding of the third wave in the past few weeks. This suggests the general public has an equally crucial role in containing the COVID-19 pandemic — by observing quarantine and social-distancing measures.

With Hong Kong's economy and employment situation now in the worst shape in more than a decade, the government has to strike a balance between maintaining economic activities and fighting off the pandemic. It might not be able to adopt or maintain for a long time sweeping compulsory social-distancing measures. It is therefore of utmost importance for residents to observe sound social-distancing measures consciously and voluntarily.

Avoiding unnecessary social gatherings and wearing a face mask in public places are the least residents can do. With quarantine and social-distancing fatigue emerging, this is not going to be easy. It demands perseverance and sacrifice on the part of all residents as well as the realization that defeating the pandemic is a matter of life and death for many, especially the vulnerable.



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In circles

A man climbs a four-story spiral staircase designed by Herzog & de Meuron, a Swiss architectural firm, at the Tai Kwun complex in Central.

EDMOND TANG / CHINA DAILY

have been lifted for pilot programs in some selected provinces due to surges in demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sound guidelines under a clear vision have facilitated the implementation and the uptake of telemedicine on the Chinese mainland, as evident in the 800 percent rise in online consultations on Ping An Good Doctor, the largest online health platform on the mainland, from December to January.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed insufficiencies and limitations in Hong Kong's health system; and telemedicine has demonstrated its potential as a useful complement to in-person consultations. Telemedicine services should be further developed and expanded to increase Hong Kong residents' access to healthcare services, and now is conceivably the right time to move forward in this arena. It is promising to see initial steps for telemedicine development in Hong Kong, although much needs to be done for successful integration into the local health system. With due consideration for local contextual factors, demographics and epidemiological trends, a comprehensive plan that outlines a clear road map and timeline for strategic implementation of telemedicine in the SAR's health system is urgently needed. Perhaps then, the person-centered, community-based model that Hong Kong desperately needs will be within our reach soon.

Mika Chan is a researcher in healthcare and social development at Our Hong Kong Foundation. Bill Chan is an intern in healthcare and social development at Our Hong Kong Foundation. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.