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EDITORIAL

What Can Family Physicians Do For The Unemployed?

Hong Kong had had spectacular economic growth for almost a decade and enjoyed virtually full employment. This has changed since the beginning of the Asian economic turmoil a year ago. The unemployment rate has climbed from 2.5% to 4.5% while underemployment also rose to 2.6%.¹ This means that there are now over 200,000 people who are either unemployed or underemployed in Hong Kong. These rates are expected to stay high in the foreseeable future.²

There is little doubt that unemployment has come to the top of the political agenda in Hong Kong. Both the government and the major political parties are showing grave concern on this social and economic crisis. While acknowledging the pain that the unemployed and their families are suffering, the government is also indicating that this current economic downturn is something that Hong Kong has to live with for a while if we are to regain our economic competitiveness in the world.² This, however, does not make the human suffering any more palatable.

Seven major political parties have come together for the first time to investigate possible actions to be taken to help lessen the impact of the current economic recession. They have also recognised the damaging effects of unemployment on individuals and families and have put job creation on the top of their action list. However, it is unlikely that these actions will turn things around quickly.

The health effects of unemployment have been well investigated. Research studies with a range of designs provide reasonably good evidence that unemployment itself is detrimental to health and has an impact on health outcomes, causing physical and mental ill-health as well as greater use of health services.³ The relationship between unemployment and excess mortality in unemployed males has been well proven.⁴ Men seeking work are particularly vulnerable because of their family responsibilities as well as their reluctance to seek help.⁵

The effects of unemployment on health are also beginning to surface in our community. There has been a surge of counselling requests to welfare agencies relating to unemployment and financial difficulties in Hong Kong in recent months.⁶

As family physicians, we are likely to be one of the first contacts for help for the unemployed and their families. I personally have recently had

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patients telling me that either they or their family members have lost their jobs. But what can we as family physicians do?

We may not be able to create jobs but we should be able to offer some help to those patients and families suffering from the ill effects of unemployment. We should recognise the close relationship between unemployment, poverty and ill health.⁷ The unemployed and their families will present to us with physical and psychological problems. Enquiries into the family's finances are indicated in certain cases and will lead us to identify those who need special attention. These patients are particularly prone to develop psychological illnesses relating to excessive stress, e.g. anxiety and depression. We should explore the possible relationship between these illnesses and unemployment. We must also make every effort to recognise and treat depression adequately because morbidity and mortality from depression can be reduced.⁸ We should also consider referring patients to social welfare agencies and should take an active role in raising the issue of re-training and work experience.⁹

In conclusion, family physicians have a clear role to play in this time of financial crisis. We must recognise the close association between ill health and

unemployment. We should try to reduce the health impacts of unemployment and ensure that poor health does not act as a barrier to returning to work.⁹ Our active supports for the poor and the unemployed may not alleviate their financial difficulties but will certainly help to make their lives a lot more liveable. ■

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