

Hong Kong College of Paediatricians
Submission to the Panel on Welfare Services of the Legislative Council
on the Establishment of the Family Council
14 February 2008

The Chief Executive's 2006-07 Policy Address announced that there was to be a study on the set up of a Family Commission to be ready in mid-2007. To date, the study has yet to be made public so that the considerations behind the final decision to establish a Family Council in December 2007 is unclear. Never-the-less, the Hong Kong College of Paediatricians supports fully the Government's intention for the Council to strengthen families and build a more caring and harmonious society.

Long before the set up of this Family Council, the Government accorded special attention to certain vulnerable groups with the establishment of the Commission on Youth in 1990, the Elderly Commission in 1997 and the Women's Commission in 2001. Within our society, one of the most vulnerable groups amongst all ages are in fact children who are unable to speak for themselves and who do not have the power to vote. The international community, bearing in mind "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care" saw the need for a separate convention to address specifically the rights of the child. Our own Legislative Council also unanimously passed a motion on 8th June last year urging the Government to fulfill her obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to set up a Commission on Children. The 2006-07 Policy Address did say "dedicated groups would be set up to oversee specific sectors as need arises" in this new entity focusing on the family. While the non-official members of the Family Council were appointed in their personal capacity, in fact its membership encompasses the chairpersons of the Commission on Youth, the Elderly and the Women's Commissions. There is no such representation from a similar body that speaks for all the children in Hong Kong, a sector that accounts for 1 in 5 of our population.

As outlined in the paper provided by the administration in the present discussion, indeed, "the root of many complicated social problems often lies at home" but these problems do not only need to be tackled from "the family perspective" but also from that of the individual members especially the children whose views are easy to overlook and whose interests often overshadowed by that of the adults. The continuous media reports of serious mishaps afflicting children bear witness to our concerns that families are not necessarily safe havens for children. Most physical and sexual abuse of children occur at home. Children at tender ages suffer neglect at home as well when they are left to fend for themselves while their parents are away attending to their gambling and other interests. Children's lives are being ended prematurely from their unwittingly climbing out of windows or being thrown out of high-rise buildings. Children as young as 9 are taking their own lives while others die from their parents' extended suicide. Attending to children's individual interest in the family is so important that in some countries when reports of domestic violence are being investigated, instead of "one social worker one family", a child advocate join hands with an adult advocate during the outreach to ensure the children's interests are protected. While we appreciate adults have rights, for example, to work, we also need to protect the children's right to proper attention and care. Hence when the Family Council identifies core family values and family policies, voices for children and children's voices are essential.

That Commissions for Youth, the Elderly or Women did not simply disappear with the formation of the Family Council speaks for the fact that there are many issues related to these population groups that involve matters outside the family. In relation to children left unattended, while it is important for working parents to have affordable alternate childcare, it does not make sense to have more and more children in longer and longer hours of extended out-of-home care. The situation that needs to be rectified is the meagre wages earned by the parents so that they do not have to work undue long hours in multiple employments in order to make ends meet. Children need protection in and out of the boundaries of the family as well. How well some legislations in Hong Kong protect children can be gauged by the media report a fortnight ago that a convicted paedophile preferred Hong Kong to his home country as his place of residence after he served his sentence for child molestation in a foreign land.

We should not be misled by Hong Kong's low infant mortality and long life expectancy into a state of complacency. Many of our adults' chronic ill health comes from unhealthy life styles acquired in the young and our youth problems originate from their adverse experiences in early childhood. When the Government identified one of the major roles of the Family Council as rationalizing the work of the Elderly Commission, the Women's Commission and the Commission on Youth, before all memberships end in March 2009, we hope that during the coming 14 months the Council will ensure that children's interests will be given due consideration in considering the future direction and structure of the Council. We also expect a high degree of transparency during this process in the setting of agendas for the Council, the Council's deliberations and decision-making as in other Government appointed advisory committees.