



Reflecting on the past and looking to the future: an interview with Mr Thomas Chung-ching Chan, JP

Mr Chan delivered the opening remarks at the 7th Asia-Pacific eHealth Conference at the Hong Kong Science Park on 20 April 2023

by: Colson Yang, Nicole Su

Year 6, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China

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With advances in technologies such as artificial intelligence, alongside an ever-changing global political climate, the public health sector faces more challenges—and opportunities—than ever before. Vaccine hesitancy and health misinformation are rife in today's digital age, while the rise of artificial intelligence technologies and big data opens new avenues for traditional Chinese medicine and its integration into modern Western medicinal sciences. These are among the issues reflected in the work of Mr Thomas Chung-ching Chan, JP, Permanent Secretary for Health at the Health Bureau. His more than 34 years of experience as one of Hong Kong's public administrators have helped ensure that our city upholds its standard of excellence in healthcare and maintains its leadership role as a bridge between Western and traditional Chinese medicine.

Mr Chan first joined the Government in 1991. Prior to his appointment as Permanent Secretary for Health, he held numerous posts, including positions in the former Civil Service Branch; the former Planning, Environment and Lands Branch; the former City and New Territories Administration; and the HKETO (Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office). In the latter, he was posted to HKETO in Geneva, which is the official representation of the Hong Kong SAR of the People's Republic of China at the World Trade Organization. During this time, Mr Chan gained unique insight into Hong Kong's strengths as a multicultural and multidimensional city, and how best to leverage its position as a bridge between East and West. Nevertheless, the longest phase of his career—spanning 11 years—has been

dedicated to the governance of health policy. He served as Principal Assistant Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food from 2006 to 2008, and Deputy Secretary for Food and Health (Health) from 2008 to 2012, before re-joining the Health Bureau in 2020 as Director of Special Duties. He has since been appointed as Permanent Secretary for Health. He considers the central focus of his career to have been closely tied to health, having been called upon to assist during the 2009 swine influenza pandemic and the more recent COVID-19. In his spare time, Mr Chan keeps active through running, swimming and hiking. He previously volunteered as a mini-rugby coach, and has recently taken up sailing.

One of the highlights of Mr Chan's career was his contribution to tackling Hong Kong's COVID-19 pandemic. His reflections on how the Government managed the outbreak, what might have been done differently, and the key takeaways offer valuable insights for the management of future public health crisis. According to Mr Chan, Hong Kong's public health challenges have long been intertwined with the city's development. The city has consistently learnt from and adapted to past outbreaks, such as the plague and cholera during the colonial era, and the 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus) epidemic. These experiences shaped Hong Kong's streetscape, building designs, sewage systems and outbreak management protocols. Hong Kong was not taken by surprise when coronavirus first entered the community in 2020. The city was prepared with lockdown protocols, social distancing measures and a well-equipped health system to deal



Mr Chan (third right), who also served as Chairman of the Working Group on Oral Health and Dental Care, held a press conference on the Working Group's final report on 6 December 2024



Mr Chan (front row, second left), who also led the Government's working group on COVID-19 testing, visited the temporary air-inflated laboratory providing testing services for the Government, accompanied by the Chinese Mainland nucleic acid testing support team, at the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park Sports Centre on 26 August 2020



Mr Chan and student reporters Nicole and Colson

with an anticipated surge in cases. What did surprise health experts, however, was the duration of the pandemic. The outbreak was initially predicted to last between 6 months and a year. When it persisted for nearly 3 years, the greatest challenge became balancing the city's many competing needs and priorities. Early control measures included the closure of schools and tightening the city's border control. As the pandemic progressed, however, the educational needs of the youth and the economic imperative to fully reopen borders increased. One of the most difficult tasks for public health officials was reconciling these competing priorities.

Another challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic was the surge in vaccine hesitancy. Hong Kong citizens were privileged to have access to both inactivated and mRNA vaccines. Despite this, the vaccine rollout was met with considerable public scepticism, resulting in a slower initial uptake. This was particularly problematic among the most vulnerable groups, including children and older adults, who had the lowest vaccination rates.¹ Future public health policies should incorporate measures to address vaccine hesitancy, particularly in light of the rise in online misinformation. Such measures may include promoting evidence-based health information through official channels.

More recently, Mr Chan has focused on leveraging Hong Kong's unique position as an international city with strong connections to both Chinese Mainland and the wider global professional community. Hong Kong is well placed to serve as a bridge for collaboration and the translation of scientific research and innovation. With the establishment of the Greater Bay Area International Clinical Trial Institute, the city is ideally positioned to facilitate collaboration between researchers as well as research institutions in Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland in conducting clinical trials. In addition, Mr Chan believes that Hong Kong has significant potential to promote Chinese medicine on a global scale, while working closely with the sector to provide more comprehensive services to local citizens and improve health outcomes. With the first Chinese medicine hospital commenced services, Hong Kong aims to deliver integrated Chinese and Western medicine services, with Chinese medicine playing a predominant role and in collaboration with Western medicine practitioners based at the hospital. Mr Chan also envisions that this collaboration between Chinese and Western medicine, together with the use of both English and Chinese as medium of communication among professionals, can enhance mutual understanding within the medical community in Hong Kong and internationally. One of the hospital's new initiatives is to develop a database on herbal-drug interactions, enabling Chinese and Western medicine to work

synergistically and safely, and improving treatment outcomes in conditions for which Western medicine alone may not work best.

Having spent over one-third of his career working in public health, Mr Chan expresses his sincere appreciation to the healthcare professionals in Hong Kong, who have always shown a high standard of professionalism and dedication, even in the most difficult times. Whether during the COVID-19 pandemic or the more recent Tai Po fire, Mr Chan has witnessed overwhelming support

from professionals across sectors who volunteered their time and expertise to assist affected citizens. Working in healthcare policy has been all the more rewarding for Mr Chan as he collaborates with these dedicated individuals.

Reference

1. Centre for Health Protection, Department of Health, Hong Kong SAR Government. Statistics on Government COVID-19 Vaccination Programme. Available from: <https://www.chp.gov.hk/en/features/106989.html>. Accessed 1 Mar 2026.