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\$70m to boost civil servants' dental scheme

THE government announced yesterday the allocation of \$70 million for a one-year extension of the present civil servants' dental scheme.

A government spokesman confirmed that the scheme as reported in the Standard last week, would be continued until the end of next May.

The Finance Committee, the spokesman said, believed the one-year extension would cost an extra \$70 million.

The committee had set aside \$20 million, while \$50 million would be earned over from last year.

This is because of the \$90 million set aside for the scheme in its first year of implementation, only \$40 million has been spent.

NECESSARY

The committee's approval was given in the middle of this month, following a request by the Civil Service Branch that the scheme be extended.

The extension was felt necessary by both official and staff sides of the Standing Committee on Medical and Dental Facilities for Civil Servants.

In fact, a one-month temporary extension had been granted to the scheme last month to give the Civil Service Branch time to prepare its submission to the government.

Figures show that a total of 24,475 applications were received by the end of April, with the amount of reimbursement totalling more than \$30 million.

The government estimated the amount to be \$40 million by end of May when the scheme was in its full year of implementation.

The popularity of the scheme grew steadily despite its controversial aspects.

The scheme allows every civil servant to seek private dental treatment and claim officially-fixed rates of reimbursement, up to the maximum amount allowed.

However, the amount of reimbursement was treated as part of the officer's salary and subject to tax.

Many civil servants still preferred private dental service instead of waiting in some cases, for up to seven months for free treatment from the government service.

Under the scheme, dental treatment is classified into two categories - one needing prior official approval and the other needing no such approval.

Under the "no-approval" category, civil servants can receive treatment and claim up to \$1,000. The other category requires approval from the Medical and Health Department before an applicant can seek private dental service for which he can claim up to \$7,000.

Figures show that over 95 per cent of all claimants have applied for the maximum of reimbursement available under the scheme.