

\$80m lifeline for seriously ill patients

By MARIANA WAN

PATIENTS who need transplants or have rare life-threatening diseases will be able to apply to an \$80 million fund for treatment overseas if it is not available in the territory.

But the proposed Health Care and Promotion Fund, which also covers research and health education, drew immediate criticism from legislators.

Dr Huang Chen-ya of the Democratic Party said Hong Kong would benefit more if doctors were flown in from abroad.

"In that case, local doctors could participate and assist and gain first hand experience," he said. "We should promote local expertise."

Surgeons in Hong Kong can now conduct most transplant operations, including

HEALTH

heart and liver procedures, and they can do complicated kidney surgery.

But a lack of organs has forced families to appeal for public donations so desperately ill children can seek a new lease of life overseas.

It is believed people who find themselves in this situation will benefit, although Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare Shelley Lau Lee Lai-kuen said the Government had still to work out funding mechanisms.

There are also suggestions that the scheme, while laudable as far as it goes, should be more flexible.

Dr Huang said it should help people get treatment in local private hospitals if it was not available in public hospitals.

Dr Poon Wai-sang, senior lecturer and chief of

neurosurgery at the Prince of Wales Hospital, said he had referred patients with brain problems such as blood-vessel malformations, benign tumours and brain cancer to Japan for treatment.

These diseases could be treated by gamma knife radio-surgery, a form of non-invasive surgery which became available only recently in Hong Kong at a private hospital.

"I have patients who needed to borrow money from friends or appeal for public donations so they could go to Japan for treatment," he said.

"Of course, if the technique is available in private hospitals in Hong Kong, I hope money will still be granted to them for treatment here."

Mrs Lau said those behind the scheme hoped it would lift from already-dis-

tressed families, the additional emotional burden of having to ask for donations.

Subject to Legco's approval, the fund may also help voluntary agencies which run short-term preventive medicine schemes, such as testing old people's cholesterol levels or checking their eyesight.

A committee, chaired by Secretary for Health and Welfare Katherine Fok Lo Shiu-ching, may also grant funds for research on topics such as air pollution and its relation to asthma in children.

Dr Huang said the scheme, which also aims to promote health awareness, could cover sponsorship for concerts or sporting events to stop organisers turning to tobacco firms.

He said the scheme also risked doubling up with work of the University Grants Committee.