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## Action needed to remedy past neglect

THE GOVERNMENT has neglected programmes for mentally handicapped children because that particular group does not have the political support enjoyed by the elderly, who have been singled out for the greatest benefits in the White Paper, Into the 1990s and Beyond. The low priority accorded to the mentally handicapped was evident yesterday at a press conference by the Secretary for Health and Welfare, Mrs Elizabeth Wong Chien Chi-lien, answering questions about what the Government was prepared to do to help the young with no future other than life in institutions. She admitted that the Government had not reviewed the needs of the mentally handicapped since 1977, and promised that a new study would be completed later this year. She also admitted to a chronic shortage of funds for the mentally handicapped, but said the study must be finished before her branch could decide how much more money to allocate to individuals who are out of the public eye and mind.

This weekend an international conference on the mentally retarded in Hongkong coincides with the

phasing-out of a foster parent sponsorship scheme under the aegis of the Save the Children Fund. The bitter irony of this is apparent to those who have had to witness the end of a programme to free children from institutions so that they can grow up in a more congenial environment. The China-Hongkong director of the fund, Mr Phillip Barker, feels betrayed and outraged that the scheme of hope costing only \$776,000 to place eight children for three years with foster parents is being scuttled because of a lack of Government support. The Social Welfare Department will strive to assimilate the mildly mentally handicapped into its foster care programme for normal children, but it means they risk keeping such children in the limbo of institutions.

Mrs Wong admitted past failings yesterday when promising a fresh look at the needs of the mentally handicapped. That is a start, but the real test of the Government's will to tackle the problem will come when the Social Welfare Department responds to the report, and announces how much it is prepared to spend to remedy the neglect of the last decade.