

About-face angers nurses

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Nursing associations have accused the Government of breaking its promise to provide another 160 first degree places for the profession beginning in 1995.

They say funds have not been made available for the extra degree places, despite the fact that the Governor, Chris Patten, pledged to provide them in his 1993 policy address, with an interdepartmental working group set up to discuss the issue.

Michael Ho, the Legislative Council representative of the nursing constituency, said yesterday the nurses were very unhappy about the situation.

"We feel very disappointed and we regret the government's decision.

"All these [pledges] are empty promises and I would say it's wasted the time of the working group."

Ho and other representatives of the Task Force for Promoting Tertiary Education, which is made up of seven nursing unions, met the Secretary for Health and Welfare, Elizabeth Wong, yesterday to express their anger.

Ho said the failure to provide the extra degree places would send a "very demoralising message" to the nursing profession "because they have been promised and everybody is looking forward to them".

The legislator said he was at a loss to explain why the funding had not been forthcoming, particularly as the Governor said during his policy address that \$10m had been set aside for the extra degree places.

He said he had expressly requested that an interdepartmental group be set up with

representatives from health and welfare, education and manpower and finance branches so that any resolution it endorsed would have the support of all government departments.

"But after so many months of discussion and it's been endorsed by the group, the EMB [education and manpower branch] cannot turn the resolution into reality."

Ho said Lam Woon-kwong, the deputy education and manpower secretary, said the branch tried very hard to implement the policy "but the reality is no matter how hard he tried,

we have not got it, so the result is zero". He said Wong said during yesterday's meeting that she regretted the outcome.

Task force members said they planned to take "some action to press the Government for these degrees" but he would not elaborate.

"We are aiming to start these degrees in 1995," Ho said.

The task force fears that if the extra degree places are not provided, it will be even more difficult to recruit people into the hospital-based training programmes. Members say existing degree places are under great pressure from applicants.

Hong Kong Polytechnic, for example, received 700 applicants this year for its 40 bachelor-in-nursing places.

The task force members said it was vital to increase first degree places both to attract more people to nursing and to upgrade the profession.

"It is our great concern that holding up these degree places will hinder the professionalism of nursing in Hong Kong.

"This will keep nursing at status lower than other health care professionals."

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