



香港兒科基金
Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation

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30% of secondary students considered harming themselves or suicide over the past 6 months Internet being key source of health information and teenagers trust their peers over doctors The HK Paediatric Society & HK Paediatric Foundation: teenagers' low health literacy and self management of health issues may lead to disastrous consequences

The recent surge of suicidal incidents among students has touched the hearts of many adults. The situation is alarming and worrying. According to the survey conducted by the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation, almost 30% of secondary students considered harming themselves or committing suicide over the past six months. Mental health problem is the second most prevalent health issues that teenagers prefer to manage by themselves based on the information search from internet instead of seeking help from medical professionals. Both organizations pointed out that youngsters lack the ability to differentiate whether the information is trustworthy or not. Self-management of health issues may lead to disastrous consequences. Mental health problems and low health literacy in young people is only the tip of an iceberg. The Society and the Foundation urge the government to formulate a comprehensive child health policy to improve the situation.

In order to understand more on health literacy and high risk behaviors of Hong Kong youngsters, the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation conducted a survey on 1,685 secondary school students from March to early April, 2016. Survey revealed that a high percentage of Hong Kong secondary school students were suffering from mental health problems, over 60% of respondents reported they felt sad or cried for no reason (62%) or even suffered from sleeping disorders (63%). 27% of respondents considered harming themselves or committing suicide over the past six months.

Furthermore, 8% of secondary school students were cyber bullied over the past year, among them, 40% were depressed and 18% even considered ending their lives. Youngsters tend to solve health problems including mental distress by searching solution from the internet.

- 35% think that secondary school students are not kids anymore, they should search information when they are sick for self treatment
- 66% prefer to handle health issues by searching information from the internet instead of seeking medical help; Weight management, mental health problems and acne/skincare problems are the top 3 popular health topics
- 34% think that online information are reliable
- 29% consider an article with more Like/ Share is more reliable
- 40% consider that even without doctor's prescription, they can still try other remedies
- 38% consider their friends' experiences more reliable than doctors' recommendations

Health literacy affects one's ability to make correct medical decisions

Are youngsters really able to evaluate the accuracy of health information available from the internet? "Health literacy refers to the ability to acquire and understand basic medical information and make appropriate medical decisions," according to Dr. Chan Chok Wan, Chairman of Board of Directors of Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation and Past President of the International Pediatric Association. Low health literacy will affect the ability to utilize basic health

information (e.g. drug dosage information and appropriate care on chronic illnesses). Studies also showed that high risk behaviors such as smoking and low participation on preventive health measures (e.g. influenza vaccination) are more prevalent for people with low health literacy. Their health problems will eventually become a burden to the society.

Dr. Chan added, "Medical advancements are at rocket speed today, in order to make the appropriate health decisions, the public and especially youngsters should improve their health literacy. One can only make appropriate health decisions by knowing how to acquire and evaluate the accuracy of health information provided to them."

Low health literacy on Hong Kong secondary school students

Dr. Wong Hiu Lei, Lilian, President of the Hong Kong Paediatric Society, pointed out that in preventive healthcare such as immunization, less than 40% of secondary school students know that teenagers should receive meningococcal and HPV vaccine for their own protection. 41% of secondary school students expressed refusal on HPV vaccination even if the government provides it free. The major reasons of refusal include "don't want to be vaccinated for no reason" and "the vaccine is useless". This situation reflected inadequate health literacy in youngsters and their ignorance on the risks and benefits of these vaccines. With such low level of health literacy and refusal to seek professional advice, they will miss the chance to protect their long term health.

Mental health problems and low health literacy require immediate attention. High prevalence of self-management on health issues among youngsters may lead to disastrous consequences

"Survey reflected high incidence of mental health problems in youngsters and yet they tend to rely on information from the internet or peers to help themselves. Some of them even consider their peers more trustworthy than doctors! To make the situation worse, many Hong Kong teenagers have low health literacy, if they only evaluate accuracy according to number of "likes" or "shares", they are rendering themselves into health risks and consequences. These inappropriate treatments can be disastrous," said Dr. Wong.

Dr. Wong also emphasized, "it is essential to improve health literacy of youngsters so they know the importance of preventive health care and when to seek help from medical professionals." Adolescent behaviors are often affected by physical changes, environmental factors, personal relationships, high risk behaviors and social trends. It is important to review the underlying reasons for their emotions and behaviors carefully. Dr. Wong suggested teenagers to seek help from teachers, social workers and trusted adults if they encounter any emotional or behavioral issues first. However, if the emotional disturbance remains persistent and unstable, they should consult medical professionals immediately rather than handling themselves.

Dr. Charles E. Irwin, Jr., Director of the Division of Adolescent & Young Adult Medicine, and Director of Health Policy in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) commented, "We need to engage schools, community groups, health professionals, the media, the business community and government to assume more responsibility for educating our young people about the importance of weighing the pluses and minuses of the information that they are being exposed to. "

Development of a comprehensive child health policy to raise health literacy of youngsters is imminent

Dr. Chan Chok Wan told us, "Teenagers encounter new health challenges every day. Mental health problems and low health literacy in youngsters is only the tip of an iceberg and they need more definite treatment rather than an ad-hoc remedy. Apart from improving their health literacy, the government should engage in fundamental solutions such as implementing a

comprehensive child health policy. It is essential to provide long term health protection to our new generation and the society as a whole."

Dr. Chan also reminded that a comprehensive child health policy should be child-centered and family-driven. It should be a high level one and implemented across different government departments. It is also important to consider different social demographics to ensure equity. Furthermore, the policy should not only focus on disease treatment but also prevention and early intervention. Establishment of a central registry to collect and analyze the relevant child health indexes would be essential for future planning and policy making.

In 2015, the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation composed the first "Child Health Policy Proposal for Hong Kong" and has submitted to the HKSAR government. "Mental health problems on youngsters have rung the bell, it reminds us a comprehensive child health policy is imminent."

-The End-

Appendix: How to evaluate the accuracy of health information available in the internet

Is the source credible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information in a journal or on the Web should have an identifiable source or an author. If the information is medical, credibility is generally enhanced if it is provided by a medical institution, an entity that brings together medically knowledgeable professionals, or a government health agency.
Accuracy of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try to determine whether the information is supported by evidence from scientific studies, other data or expert opinion.
Judge whether the information is mere personal experience or supported by a few cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze whether the information is based on evidence from a study, on expert opinion or is it merely the opinion of the writer, especially when obtaining information through instant messaging, internet forums, chat rooms and bulletins.
Is the information up-to-date?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Given that health information is constantly changing as new discoveries are made, it is important to make sure that the information is current.
Is there a conflict of interest?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be aware of any commercial element or product related information that has been included in the health information. This may not fully reflect the real situation or there may be biased information. Analyze if the information is fair and objective.

The Hong Kong Paediatric Society

Formed in 1962, the objectives of the society are to advance the knowledge of child health care, to maintain high standard of child health care, to promote child health through public education and to foster comradeship. www.medicine.org.hk/hkps/

The Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation

The Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation is a charitable organization wholly owned by the Hong Kong Paediatric Society. It was established in 1994 by child health professionals from intersectoral domains and community celebrities for promotion of child health and child advocacy through public education. www.hkpr.org.hk