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August 1, 2005

Parents Ignorant of Fatal Paediatric Infectious Diseases. Survey says.

Heighten Alertness to Prevent Fatality. Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation Urged.

After the outbreak of SARS and the recent streptococcus suis infection outbreak in China, many people have heightened their antennas on infectious diseases. However, according to a recent survey conducted by the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation, most Hong Kong parents are still ignorant of paediatric infectious diseases, and their alertness towards symptoms of fatal infectious diseases is still low, which will lead to negligence on preventive measures and small children vulnerable to fatal infectious diseases, said Dr. Chan Chok Wan, chairman of the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation.

Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation, a medical association aims at enhancing public knowledge on paediatric diseases, has conducted a survey in June this year to understand the need of public education. A total of 2,266 completed questionnaires from parents with at least one child of five years old or younger are collected from 30 kindergartens randomly drawn from the kindergartens in Hong Kong, and the data is processed by Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The results of the survey are announced today in a press conference by chairman of the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation, Dr. Chan Chok Wan, and representatives Dr. Ng Yin Ming and Dr. Yau Yat Sun.

Parents' alertness towards fatal paediatric infectious diseases and their complications is low

The survey indicates most parents are only aware of the more common paediatric infectious diseases such as influenza (90%), chickenpox (86%), and common cold (73%), or massively reported infectious disease such as SARS (75%). Awareness of fatal paediatric infectious diseases such as meningitis (42%), pneumonia (53%) and acute intestinal infection (54%) is, however, very low.

Instead, parents are most worried about SARS (72%) and Japanese encephalitis (54%), which are actually least prevailing. On the contrary, parents are not too worried about the highly fatal paediatric infectious diseases such as meningitis (43%) and pneumonia (25%). With such low awareness level of these fatal diseases, the risk will be complete negligence leading to fatality, which is most worrying.

The survey shows that for complications caused by upper respiratory diseases, most parents are only familiar with pneumonia (79%). Their knowledge of the more severe complications caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae* – a bacteria which is highly prevalent among children and with high resistance to antibiotic, is only limited to pneumonia (62%). Most parents are ignorant of other potentially fatal complications caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, such as meningitis (38%) and sepsis (9%), or diseases that cause impairment like otitis media (14%) and sinusitis (11%), as they are least publicized. As the early symptoms of these fatal diseases are very similar to those caused by upper respiratory diseases, parents may easily neglect them.

"Complications could accelerate at an alarmingly high speed, for example, meningitis could take away the life of a child in just 24 hours. Parents should take extreme caution!" Dr. Yau Yat Sun explained.



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Parents equally ignorant of symptoms of fatal paediatric infectious diseases

According to the survey, parents are quite knowledgeable of symptoms of cold/fever such as running nose (91%), coughing (83%), and high body temperature (69%). However, their alertness level on symptoms of common but fatal paediatric infectious diseases, is very low, these symptoms include: lethargic (44%), little red dots on the body (33%) and continuous fever for children under three months old (23%), which are symptoms of meningitis or serious infection.

Dr. Ng Yin Ming commented babies below six months old are still under the protection of their mothers' antibody, any fever in young babies should be treated with great respects .

"Parents should be careful of the symptoms of common but fatal paediatric infectious diseases, as negligence could lead to fatal consequences." Dr. Ng Yin Ming reminded.

Parents' knowledge on pediatric infectious diseases is low

The survey shows most parents consider behaviours such as washing hands (73%) and avoiding contact with infected children (70%) to be effective in preventing infectious diseases. 65% of parents know vaccination is the most effective way to prevent infectious diseases.

According to Dr. Ng Yin Ming, the survey fully demonstrates parents' insignificant knowledge of paediatric infectious diseases, and they have very low alertness level towards fatal infectious diseases such as meningitis, pneumonia, and acute intestinal infection. It is doubtful whether they can be good guardians of children's health.

"Don't assume paediatric infectious diseases are something minor and inconsequential. They could be fatal. Many infectious diseases such as complications of *Streptococcus pneumoniae* (including meningitides, pneumonia and sepsis) could be life threatening! Early symptoms of *Streptococcus pneumoniae* are not obvious and they share many similar symptoms of cold and flu, which may mislead parents. The disease could accelerate very quickly and could lead to death of the kids in 24 hours. Parent should take extreme caution of paediatric infectious diseases," noted Dr. Ng. Dr. Ng urged parents to consult doctors immediately if they are unsure of those symptoms. And parents should consider having their children vaccinated, which can prevent their children from contracting paediatric infectious diseases.

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