



Press Release

10 January 2005

***Prevention of Avian Influenza:
Consultation on Long-term Direction
to Minimize the Risk of Human Infection***

The Advisory Committee on Communicable Diseases of the Hong Kong Medical Association has discussed the consultation paper on 《Prevention of Avian Influenza: Consultation on Long Term Direction to Minimize the Risk of Human Infection》released by the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau. The Committee comprised expert members of microbiologists from the University of Hong Kong, public health expert, infectious disease specialist, physicians and pediatricians. As a professional body, the HKMA has focused the discussion on the scientific aspects and how to minimize the risk people getting infected by the avian influenza viruses. The consultation document and all the relevant up-to-date scientific information on avian influenza infections in animals and in human were reviewed and discussed.

The HKMA: -

- a) Supports the direction of having a long-term solution to prevent avian influenza outbreak in Hong Kong.
- b) Supports that protection of public health should be the top priority.
- c) Supports the long-term vision to sustain the goal of zero infection and transmission in Hong Kong (para 2.3).
- d) Recognizes that all precautionary measures can only reduce but not eliminate the risk. Despite success in Hong Kong, avian influenza may still cause outbreaks and jump from animal-to-human in other parts of the world.
- e) Recognizes that the existing measures (including those listed in Annex B and detailed in Chapter 3) are effective but not foolproof. The HKMA opines that the existing measures should continue irrespectively of the final governmental decision on central slaughtering.
- f) Agrees that separating humans from live poultry can serve to further reduce the risk of direct animal-to-human transmission and opines that central slaughtering is the best way to segregate people from live poultry.



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In line with the strategy to reduce contact between the public and live poultry, the proximity of poultry farms and poultry markets (e.g. Cheung Sha Wan Temporary Wholesale Poultry Market) also pose a risk of transmission of avian influenza viruses from live poultry to human beings. It is better to move these farms and markets out of the ambit of residential areas.

Regarding Options A and B (Page 19-21), the HKMA: -

Wishes to point out that the “freshly slaughtered chicken” option may also carry a potential health risk – that of bacterial food poisoning. Firstly, cross-contamination may occur during the slaughtering, dressing and delivery process. Secondly, in summer times, bacterial pathogens (e.g. salmonella) may multiply rapidly during the hours of “display” period. The HKMA opines that this mode of operation should be closely monitored by the Government. Scientific information should be obtained to further evaluate the health risk from this mode of operation.

As an influenza pandemic is likely to come, the HKMA:-

- a) Opines that there should be a local contingency plan and preparedness checklist. The local plan should be aligned with the current regional and global strategies.
- b) Suggests the government to give priority and emphasis to promptly identify the first human cluster of avian or “pandemic” influenza infection. This is important to prevent it from spreading globally. Professional training should be provided for medical practitioners in both the public and private sectors to raise their standard of clinical screening so as to increase the chance of identifying the first human cluster and to prevent false alarm. At a regional level, the government should direct efforts in building strong links with mainland China and to ensure that a robust surveillance program is in place. For a killer pathogen that only emerges once every 30 to 40 years, this task is going to be difficult. Consideration should be given to ensure the surveillance program a sustainable activity.
- c) Suggests that a Pearl River Delta Regional Expert Committee be set up to





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ensure collaborated efforts among the region to prevent the next pandemic from emerging. Membership should include epidemiologists, public health professionals, microbiologists, veterinary and expertise from other relevant fields.

Notes to editors:

The Hong Kong Medical Association, founded in 1920, aims to bring together Hong Kong's government, institutional, university and private medical practitioners for an effective exchange of views and co-ordination of efforts. The foremost objective of the Association is to safeguard and promote public health. The Association speaks collectively for its members and aims to keep its members abreast of medical ethics, issues and advances around the world. In fulfilling these goals, the association hopes to better serve the people of Hong Kong.

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