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Legislative Council Panel on Health Services
Meeting on 27 February 2001

Report on the "Bao ning dan" (保寧丹) Incident

Purpose

This paper reports on the recent lead poisoning incident due to an herbal pill "Bao ning dan" and outlines the regulatory framework on Chinese medicine.

Background

2. The Department of Health (DH) received a report on 19 January 2001 about a woman suffering from lead poisoning after taking an herbal pill "Bao ning dan" allegedly made and supplied by a Chinese medicine practitioner (CMP). The DH conducted investigation immediately.

Actions taken by DH

3. Chemical analysis of "Bao ning dan" obtained from the CM clinic confirmed that each pill contained lead that was over 30 times the allowable daily intake. A person taking 2 to 10 pills a day, according to the regime prescribed by the CMP, would have consumed 60-300 times the allowable daily intake. To prevent further supply of "Bao ning dan" to the public, DH seized all stock of the incriminated pills and collected samples of suspected items found in the clinic of the CMP for further analysis. Laboratory results of other drug preparations manufactured and supplied by the CMP indicated that they did not contain excessive levels of lead.

4. DH issued a press release on 5 February 2001 to invite individuals who had taken the herbal pill to come forward for health screening and laboratory test. A telephone hotline system was set up to identify persons at risks and provide counseling and health education to persons with related concerns. As at 17 February 2001 when the hotline closed, 502 calls were received. Among the 78 persons screened and tested for blood lead level, seven were admitted to hospital and 15 required medical follow up because of raised blood lead levels.

5. The Public Health and Municipal Services Ordinance (Cap 132) provides that any person who sells or offers for sale, or has in his possession for the purpose of sale or preparation for sale, any food or drug intended for use by man but unfit for that purpose, shall be guilty of an offence. The DH has a surveillance system in place for detecting heavy metals in Chinese medicines. In the past five years, more than 4,000 samples were tested, of which 99% were within acceptable limits for heavy metals. Those failing the tests had been withdrawn from the market promptly.

Regulation of Chinese Medicine

6. The Chinese Medicine Ordinance (Cap. 549) provides a comprehensive regulatory framework for the regulation of Chinese medicine in Hong Kong. The subsidiary legislation for the control of Chinese medicines is being prepared by the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong. The regulations will cover, among other things, licensing of traders including manufacturers, and registration of proprietary Chinese medicines. We plan to table the subsidiary legislation at the Legislative Council later this year. The safe use of traditional Chinese medicine products will then be further enhanced.

Department of Health
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