

Hong Kong College of Paediatricians
Response to Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Discussion on Child Protection
29th June 2006

The Hong Kong College of Paediatricians appreciates the Panel's interest in child protection. We understand the incident that precipitated the current discussion is the scalding of a two year old boy in a family with four children aged one to six years in Pak Tin when they were under the care of their 83 year old grandmother. There could have been many entry points for professionals to intervene in such families with vulnerable children so that harm could be prevented.

Families with parents with drug addiction

Methadone clinics

Clients receiving methadone treatment who have young children need to have the welfare of not only the adults with addiction but that of their children, or for that matter, elderly parents if there are any, attended to. Social workers serving this population require the skills and time to serve the whole family as a unit, and if they find they have limitations, refer the families for further assistance.

Antenatal clinics / Perinatal services

Women with drug addiction who are pregnant may seek antenatal care or advice on termination of pregnancy. Others come into contact with healthcare services when they give birth. All these are not only opportunities to motivate and assist them to give up their addiction but also to see if they already have children and how the children are faring.

For new mothers, the ability of the mothers to look after their infants, the amount of support they have and the sustainability of the support need careful assessment. Alternate childcare arrangements may have to be made if there are doubts about the infants' safety.

The use of post-natal Community Nursing visits should be maximized as a home visit can be much more informative than clinic attendances.

Maternal and Child Health Centres (MCHCs)

MCHCs play an important role as theoretically, the mothers should bring their infants

for regular visits to the centres from soon after birth. Apart from having the children immunized, MCHCs are taking a holistic view to the children's growth and development. Should the mothers miss appointments, close liaison with social services is essential to trace defaulters.

Primary Care Practitioners

Children are periodically brought to medical practitioners for health reasons. An alertness to the quality of childcare and their general wellbeing and making necessary referrals when social needs are identified may prevent precarious situations deteriorating and children coming into actual harm.

Integrated Family Service Centres

In practice, these families are likely to be unstable and default clinic / office appointments. Professional outreach is required to assess the welfare of the infants and older siblings if any and also the home environment. When issues of child protection are in question, unmotivated, difficult parents' claim that they have no problems and do not need services cannot be taken as an opportunity to close or discharge the case. While offering assistance, when working with these families, there should be clear targets of improvement with a time frame. There should be a limit to our tolerance of lapses in appropriate care. To a certain extent it may be true that it is "easier" to remove a child than seek improvement within the family. Professionals are treading a more difficult path seeking behavioural changes and keeping the family "intact". We have to be aware that children are at risk and miss out on opportunities to grow and develop while we give repeated allowances to the adults to amend or change. Few parents profess they do not love their children or do not defend their rights as parents but each child also has the basic right to survival, protection, development and participation. This is a delicate balance. There should be no hesitation to seek help, advice or support from other professionals like the Family and Child Protective Services Unit or invoke Care or Protection Orders if thought necessary. Child abuse and neglect involve not only acts of commission but that of omission, that which have already impaired the child's physical and psychological health and development, or that which endanger the child's physical and psychological health and development. Waiting for clearcut signs of abuse to take action may be too late.

Nurseries / Kindergartens / Schools

Childcare workers and teachers have a good opportunity to observe the care children are receiving from their guardians. Much is revealed from the children's behaviour or physical state. We do sympathize with families in difficulties. It is important to feed

children who appear perpetually hungry, clean those who appear to need a bath, keep them company when caretakers are repeatedly late to take them home. It is even more important to sort out why these children are hungry, deficient in personal hygiene and always the last to leave and enlist the help of social services as necessary. We are not prying into other people's privacy but protecting children. For irregular school attenders, or prolonged absentees, the mutual hope between the Education and Social Welfare sectors for each other to act does little to remedy the situation although there may be a sigh of relief when the children reach fifteen.

Social Security

There are many reasons why families apply for Comprehensive Social Security Assistance. While respecting these families' confidentiality to their circumstances, officers who are trained to be sensitive to these families' other needs especially that of their children and have the know-how to make appropriate referrals to social services may well prevent many family tragedies. Under normal circumstances children are their parents' prime responsibility but for parents who have difficulties managing their finance, there needs to be means to ensure the social security assistance designated for the children is enjoyed by the children.

Mandated Therapy

Currently Care or Protection Orders for children in need allow for supervised access by social workers to the children but do not mandate the child carers to receive help themselves. To truly protect the children we need to study how parents who want to continue to care for their children can be mandated to receive counseling or therapy.

Multidisciplinary Co-operation and Community Input

It is no mean task to ensure children living in adversity grow and develop to their full potential. Professionals need to communicate, co-operate with and support each other both in the provision of services and the monitoring of the effect of such services. For the children it is essential that the monitoring includes not only their physical provisions such as food, clothings, hygiene and home safety but also their developmental and emotional wellbeing.

It is heartening to see the community concern bestowed on families after their difficulties are revealed. It would be even more heartening if our community is sensitive to the welfare of children around us and mobilizes support before these children face preventable mishaps.

Child Policy, Child Commission, Child Fatality / Serious Case Reviews

When our College responded to the Recommendations by the Jury on Death Inquest of the Coroner's Court of the Tin Shui Wai Incident in November last year, we made a number of recommendations. Sadly few are in place yet and serious child abuse cases continue to hit the media headlines. For this recent event, the scalded child was able to be soon discharged from hospital. Other subjects of child abuse and neglect are less fortunate. Hong Kong can claim we have many systems in place but we need a **Child Policy** with the clear direction that the best interest of the child is the paramount concern and an independent **Child Commission** for its implementation and monitoring. Much could be learnt from **Child Fatality / Serious Case Reviews**. The above discussion could well apply to children in families whose parents are mentally disadvantaged, have personality difficulties or mental illness. We hope we can learn from our failures in protecting children and act before it is too late.