

Monitoring Committee on Implementation of the SARS Expert Committee's Report

Cooperation with the Pearl River Delta

Purpose

This paper reports on recent developments in cooperation among the health authorities in the Pearl River Delta region, with reference to related recommendations by the SARS Expert Committee.

SARS Expert Committee's Recommendations

2. The SARS Expert Committee has recommended among others that:

- Regular data reporting systems and robust collaboration on surveillance need to be developed with the Pearl River Delta region.
- The capacity to establish links and networks and to promote exchanges of professionals, academic, hospital and technical staff between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta region in the Guangdong Province needs to be enhanced.

Existing Cooperation

3. Hong Kong has established a longstanding arrangement with the Guangdong Province and Macao for sharing of experience and exchange of information on infectious diseases. The SARS outbreaks in Guangdong and Hong Kong last year called for urgent actions to establish more effective communication channels among the three places to enable prompt and timely exchange of important information about infectious disease outbreaks and incidents. Since May 2003, there were regular

meetings among health officials and experts of the three places. They have agreed to enhance the SARS notification mechanism for regular exchange of latest information, including statistics, clinical treatment, epidemiology and progress on research. They have also agreed to enhanced collaboration in the following areas:

- exchanging information about statutory notifiable diseases of the three places on a monthly basis, and infectious diseases of concern as and when necessary.
- promptly reporting among the three places sudden upsurge of any infectious diseases of unknown nature or of public health significance; and
- establishing a point-to-point information exchange mechanism.

4. In addition to exchanges and cooperation at expert level, the Health, Welfare and Food Bureau (HWFB), Department of Health (DH) and Hospital Authority (HA) maintain high-level and close communication with the Ministry of Health, Health Department of the Guangdong Province and Macao Health Bureau, etc. on the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases. For example, at the Hong Kong-Guangdong Cooperation Joint Conference held in August 2003 and the Joint Conference of the Senior Health Officials of the Mainland, Hong Kong and Macao held in October 2003, the three places exchanged experience and views on closer collaboration on control of infectious diseases.

5. Health officials of the three places also visit each other to enhance communication and collaboration on health matters of common concern, and there are also professional exchanges between DH/HA with the Mainland and Macao counterparts on the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases.

Recent Cooperation

6. At their meeting in December 2003, senior officials and experts of the health authorities of the three places agreed to further strengthen cooperation in the following areas:

- improve the notification mechanism for infectious diseases and public health incidents on a continuous basis. In this respect, they agreed to actively explore the development of an information system on notification of infectious diseases;
- start collaboration on scientific research and strengthen exchange and collaboration on surveillance. Topics of exchange include SARS prevention, diagnosis and clinical treatment protocol, as well as AIDS prevention, control and epidemiological studies. In this respect, a Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao AIDS epidemiological study will be conducted;
- discuss and exchange planning and development of admission and treatment facilities for infectious diseases. Areas of exchange include configuration of isolation facilities for infectious diseases; operation of outpatient clinics for fever patients and triage system in the accident and emergency departments; air circulation of and preventive measures for high dependency units; and the reporting mechanism of infectious diseases at hospital level. They also agreed to continue to visit each others' facilities, especially the SARS treatment facilities; and
- enhance training and visit of professionals in public health and infectious diseases. Items of exchange include (i) HIV voluntary counselling and antibody testing, (ii) field epidemiology exchange programme, (iii) microbiology laboratory service exchange programme, and (iv) methadone service and HIV prevention exchange programme in Hong Kong. In this connection, representatives from Guangdong and Macao are invited to attend the Hong Kong International Conference on Infectious Diseases (HKICID 2004) organized by DH on 31 January and 1 February 2004.

Cooperation in Recent SARS Case in Guangzhou

7. The recent SARS case in Guangzhou fully exemplifies the cooperative efforts in the Pearl River Delta region. Health authorities in Guangdong notified DH about a suspect SARS case on the same day it was established. This allowed DH and HA to take anticipatory measures in surveillance, border control, and hospital infection control. DH maintains

daily contact with Guangdong to obtain updates of the situation. The Public Health Laboratory Center in DH also assisted in testing clinical specimens from the patient leading to confirmation of the suspected SARS case in Guangdong. DH and HA's officers and professional staff have also visited Guangdong and were given a detailed account of the clinical, epidemiological, and laboratory investigations.

8. In light of the SARS case in Guangdong, DH and HA have intensified precautionary measures to guard against the introduction of SARS infection into Hong Kong. Stepped-up measures include:

- to facilitate early detection for implementation of public health control measures, a surveillance system is set up to monitor patients with pneumonia who have a history of travel to the Guangdong Province during the 10 days before the onset of symptoms;
- DH has briefed representatives of medical groups on the latest developments relating to the SARS case in Guangzhou and their support in implementing the new measures is enlisted;
- in view of the expected increase in the number of SARS tests from public and private hospitals, both DH and HA have also expanded the capacity of their laboratories to cope with the increased workload;
- more broadcasts and health educational materials are put up at the border checkpoints with Guangdong, on top of the health declaration and temperature screening measures implemented for each incoming traveller from Guangdong;
- DH has issued letters to doctors and hospitals to provide them with updates, infection control advice, and collaboration in disease surveillance;
- on the hospital front, accident and emergency departments and outpatient clinics have started to take the temperature of all patients, and those with fever or respiratory symptoms will have to wait and have consultations at designated areas. Healthcare workers who take care of patients with fever and

respiratory symptoms are required to put on full protective gear;

- HA's Central Committee on Infectious Diseases will closely monitor the situation and development, and review infection control measures accordingly; and
- all healthcare workers and visitors to hospitals are required to wear surgical masks in all hospital areas to protect them from infection.

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