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28 January 2004

Dear Chinese Medicine Practitioners,

Outbreak of human H5N1 avian influenza in Southeast Asia

Recently, human cases infected by avian influenza have been identified in some countries of Southeast Asia. Up to date, the World Health Organization (WHO) has received laboratory confirmation of seven human cases of influenza A(H5N1) in Vietnam, including five in Hanoi region. Six of these cases in Vietnam (five children and one 30-year old woman) have died since 30 December 2003. In Thailand, three confirmed cases, who were all children, have been reported to the WHO since 23 January 2004 and two have passed away. According to the WHO, since mid-December, outbreaks of H5N1 infection have been detected in the poultry populations of the Republic of Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. Some other countries have detected deaths in poultry flocks, and the cause is currently under investigation.

While the source of infection in human cases in Vietnam and Thailand is still being investigated, the WHO has reported that most of these cases have been linked to direct contact with diseased birds. At present, the WHO has no information that the disease is spreading from person to person. Preliminary findings are similar to available investigation results from the avian influenza outbreak in 1997 in Hong Kong, which supported the view that the main mode of transmission was from bird to man, and that man-to-man transmission, although it could occur, was inefficient and rare. For more details, please make reference to the articles on avian influenza A(H5N1) of the Public Health and Epidemiology Bulletin at <http://www.info.gov.hk/dh/diseases/index.htm>. The Department of Health (DH) is closely monitoring the situation.

DH is maintaining a sensitive and comprehensive influenza surveillance system. The sentinel surveillance has showed a stable trend in influenza-like illness (ILI) activity from December until present. There were no abnormal isolates recently from our laboratory surveillance. Influenza activity in Hong Kong has been closely monitored and a weekly summary on influenza activity, as well as information resources on influenza, are available in the DH's website at <http://www.info.gov.hk/dh/diseases/influenza/influenza.htm>.

Your assistance is solicited to advise your clients on the prevention of influenza including avoidance of contact with live poultry / birds, and wash hands thoroughly after contact with live poultry / birds (especially in children), especially those who will travel to countries where avian influenza outbreaks have been reported. People suffering from respiratory symptoms should be reminded to put on face masks and refrain from going to work or school. Enclosed for your further information please find a fact sheet on avian influenza.

For further information regarding latest situation on avian influenza globally, you may visit the WHO websites at: http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/en/, <http://www.wpro.who.int/avian/> and http://w3.whosea.org/prsrles/press_release3.htm.

Yours sincerely,

(Dr. L.Y. Tse)
for Director of Health

We are committed to providing quality client-oriented service



Information on Avian Flu

Influenza

Influenza is an acute illness of the respiratory tract characterized by fever, headache, muscle ache, running nose, cough and sore throat. The disease is usually self-limiting with recovery in 2-7 days. In Hong Kong, the common subtypes of influenza are influenza A(H3N2), A(H1N1) and B. The usual peak season is from January to March each year.

Most patients with influenza recover in 2-7 days, and the body produces antibody to the virus. However, certain populations such as elderly persons and persons with chronic medical conditions are more likely to develop complications like bronchitis and pneumonia.

Avian Flu

Avian Flu (H5N1) is one type of Influenza A. It is known previously to infect birds only, but 18 and 2 human cases were documented in Hong Kong in 1997 and 2003 respectively. Avian Flu (H5N1) is transmitted from infected live birds to man. Transmission between humans is very inefficient. Avian Flu (H5N1) has similar clinical presentation as other influenza viruses. However, it is more likely to result in high fever, chest infection, respiratory failure, multi-organ failure, even death.

Outbreaks of Avian Flu in chickens have recently been reported in many Asian countries. They affect poultries mainly, but cases of human infection have also been reported. The Department of Health has been closely monitoring the situation and has adopted appropriate preventive measures to prevent the import of the disease. HKSAR has an effective surveillance system for influenza in birds and humans. Since February 2003, no human case of Avian Flu H5N1 has been found in the local population.

Prevention of Avian Flu

The best protection against influenza is by building good body resistance. This can be achieved through a balanced diet, regular exercise, adequate rest, reducing stress and no smoking. If you have a 'flu', better avoid crowded public places where the ventilation is not good.

Droppings of infected live birds and poultry may carry the Avian Flu virus. One should avoid touching live birds and poultry and their droppings. If you have been in contact with live birds and poultry, wash hands thoroughly with liquid soap and water immediately. If you keep live bird at home, avoid close contact with the pet and wash hands thoroughly with liquid soap each time after touching it or after cleaning its droppings. Schools and nurseries should take measures to prevent children from coming into contact with live birds. When traveling outside Hong Kong,



avoid touching live birds and poultry. Poultry should be thoroughly cooked before eating.

If you have symptoms of influenza, consult a doctor and wear a mask to prevent spread of the disease

Treatment of Avian Flu

People with influenza should have adequate rest and sleep and drink plenty of fluid. Anti-fever medicine and cough syrup are useful to reduce symptoms. Unless there is bacterial infection, antibiotics should not be used. Patients should also observe personal hygiene and wash hands frequently to prevent spreading the virus from the hands which can get the virus from contact with the nose or mouth. Aspirin should not be used in children because it can induce Reye's Syndrome. For patients with lower resistance or when there are signs of deterioration, e.g. persistent high fever or shortness of breath, they should seek early medical advice.

Avian Flu H5N1 is generally more severe than an ordinary "flu", and many patients require hospital care. Some anti-viral drugs may be effective in treating the condition. However, drugs should be used carefully following doctor's instructions as they may cause adverse side effects.

27 Jan 2004