

What have we heard?

- ❑ There was insufficient communication between Hong Kong and Mainland China
- ❑ HWFB and DH were complacent in not adequately following up rumours of an unexplained epidemic in Guangzhou
- ❑ There is a lack of information exchange on communicable disease matters within Mainland China generally
- ❑ Different surveillance systems exist in Hong Kong and Guangdong Province
- ❑ Cross-boundary professional and academic collaboration is very limited.

INTRODUCTION

9.1 Communicable diseases do not respect geographical boundaries, as the SARS epidemic very clearly demonstrates. Good systems of cross-boundary communication are vital if the rapid spread of disease is to be prevented and outbreaks brought quickly under control. Effective systems need to exist at every level to ensure that early warning is given to all authorities with public health responsibilities, and to ensure that the response is properly coordinated.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN GUANGDONG PROVINCE AND HONG KONG

9.2 A pre-requisite to the effective management of major incidents, including infectious diseases outbreaks, is that stakeholders must work together as equal partners. Key to this partnership is the willingness to share information openly and in a timely fashion.

9.3 The Committee notes that an expert investigation report on the outbreak of atypical pneumonia in the Guangdong Province was produced on 23 January 2003, and that the authorities in Hong Kong and WHO were not recipients of this report. Public health professionals in DH had been unable to obtain information from their counterparts in the

Guangdong Province, and collaboration between clinicians and medical academics in Hong Kong and Guangdong had been patchy and piecemeal.

9.4 In order to redress this, closer collaboration at multiple levels and with multiple channels are essential. A critical component will be regular exchange of information between DH and Guangdong provincial and municipal Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. In practice this is likely to involve the exchange of information about individual cases and contacts in order to facilitate contact tracing, early warning of potential outbreaks, and the establishment and work of joint outbreak management teams if outbreaks involve cases on both sides of the boundary. It is important that the links and relationships are developed properly, and that ongoing systems that work are in place.

- ◆ **HWFB/DH should urgently establish better communication, coordination and collaboration with Guangdong, and with the Pearl River Delta region as a whole. This should include the following –**
 - **Developing within the Pearl River Delta region a coherent system for preparedness and response to communicable disease outbreaks**
 - **Establishing a regional communicable disease surveillance network for SARS and other infections of public health importance**

- **Maintaining close liaison through official channels with Guangdong Health Bureau and Guangdong Centre for Disease Control and Prevention**
- **Promoting closer working relationships between professionals, academic, hospital and technical staff in Hong Kong and in the Pearl River Delta region.**

Cross-boundary notification

Before the SARS epidemic, there was monthly exchange of statistics between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Zhuhai, Hainan and Macao on specific infectious diseases such as cholera, malaria, viral hepatitis and AIDS. However, there was no established protocol for them to notify each other of any emerging infection or other infectious diseases that were outside the scope of the established notification system.

After the epidemic emerged in Hong Kong, the Government made a series of visits to Guangzhou in April and May to enhance information exchange and to strengthen collaboration for infectious diseases control. Agreements were reached with the Guangdong authority to establish point-to-point exchanges across the boundary between counterpart health organisations, and expand the scope of infectious diseases listed in the notification system.

9.5 The Committee notes the progress that has already been made in a number of these areas. A Guangdong - Hong Kong - Macao Expert Group was established in May and a Guangdong - Hong Kong Joint Conference, which covered the subject of communicable disease control, took place in August. Agreement has already been reached on –

- ◆ Expanding the range of notifiable diseases to include all infectious diseases that are currently notifiable on the Mainland (27), Hong Kong (28) and Macao (33), and adding other infectious diseases of concern as and when necessary
- ◆ Reporting immediately any case of serious, unidentifiable infectious disease with outbreak potential not only to the relevant authority, but also simultaneously to the health departments of the other two territories
- ◆ Setting up a point-to-point mechanism for the exchange of information that will then be followed up by designated officials.

The following areas are being pursued vigorously –

- ◆ Establishing working links and networks between public health professionals in Hong Kong and colleagues in Guangdong Centre for Disease Control and Prevention

- ◆ Promoting exchanges of professional, hospital and technical staff, particularly within the Pearl River Delta region
- ◆ Promoting academic exchanges, particularly within the Pearl River Delta region.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN HWFB/DH AND THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH, BEIJING

9.6 Within China, communicable diseases incidents and notifications are reported to the Ministry of Health in Beijing. Hence, rapid dissemination of important information about outbreaks and incidents from Beijing to the other provinces and special administrative regions will be conducive to the control of communicable diseases. Efficient surveillance of communicable disease and effective handling of outbreaks require both a prompt response at the local level and the freedom to communicate important information between technical and professional staff across geopolitical boundaries. The China Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in Beijing should ideally play a lead role in ensuring rapid flow of communicable disease intelligence between provinces, which includes routine surveillance data compiled from the provinces and early warning of potentially serious incidents, such as those that are likely to spread beyond provincial or international boundaries.

- ◆ HWFB/DH should develop closer collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Beijing on communicable disease matters.

COLLABORATION BETWEEN HONG KONG AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

9.7 International coordination of response to threats to public health is the responsibility of WHO. In 2000, WHO formally launched the Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN), a mechanism to keep the international community alert to outbreaks and ready to respond. This system proved extremely effective in dealing with SARS. The success of the system depends on receiving rapid intelligence from countries and territories whenever an incident occurs. Hong Kong has well established communication links with the GOARN team. DH reported the incident of avian influenza connected with Fujian on 19 February 2003, the same day that the diagnosis was confirmed, and DH's alert to WHO of an outbreak of atypical pneumonia at PWH on 12 March 2003 was one of the factors that led WHO to issue a global alert about cases of severe atypical pneumonia.

- ◆ HWFB/DH should maintain good collaboration with WHO, and with other national communicable disease control agencies, and should establish contingency arrangements for obtaining outside expertise during public health emergencies.