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CHINESE UNIVERSITY LAUNCHES PIONEERING RESEARCH ON ASTHMA AND ALLERGIES

The costly and increasingly prevalent diseases of asthma and allergies will come under close scrutiny by doctors at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the first-ever territory-wide survey starting next month.

Funded by the Hospital Authority, the research will probe the prevalence and severity of the diseases among school children aged between 13 and 14. The results will provide reliable estimates on the burden posed by the diseases and facilitate the assessment of future trends – which will be invaluable for the formulation of public health policies.

Entitled "An International Comparative Study of the Prevalence of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood", the study is part of an International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood (ISAAC) covering Asian countries and regions including China, Malaysia, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Singapore and the Philippines.

It is also hoped that through comparison with other countries, the study will contribute towards a better understanding of the indigenous factors - in terms of genetics, lifestyle, environmental and medical care aspects - which affect these diseases.

"Hong Kong has one of the highest prevalence rate for asthma in Southeast Asia," said Dr Roland Leung of the Chinese University's Department of Medicine, the principal investigator for the research project.

Recent studies have shown an increasing trend in the prevalence of asthma and other allergic diseases including allergic rhinitis and eczema. According to Dr Leung, 11% of Hong Kong children are estimated to be suffering from asthma, compared with six percent in a 1992 survey, and 90% of these young patients are victims of allergic asthma.

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Troubled by the rising trends, many western countries are trying hard to identify the underlying factors. "Environmental factors such as dust mite, passive smoking, exposure to combustion emission such as oxides of nitrogen, and preservative in food are amongst the determining factors," said Dr Leung.

Although such diseases are generally less prevalent in the Asia Pacific, Hong Kong has witnessed a noticeable increase in the number of patients as well as higher rate of asthma admissions, probably due to a change of lifestyle and environment.

This first research project of its kind comprises questionnaire surveys and tests to identify asthma prevalence among 3000 schoolchildren recruited from schools randomly selected from each of the 18 districts in Hong Kong (except for the Island district). Each participating children will complete a written and a video questionnaire. During the phase II study, there will be a genetic and environmental comparison between asthmatic children and the same number of non-asthmatic children.

ISAAC was founded in 1989 and has established centres of study in many countries in the last two years - including the Prince of Wales Hospital in Hong Kong, five centres each from China and Malaysia, four centres from Taiwan, two centres from Japan, and one centre each from Korea, Singapore and Philippines.

Note to Editors: Photo distributed via GIS press boxes.

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