



DAILY INFORMATION BULLETIN

Sunday, November 26, 1972

HONG KONG FIGHTS TUBERCULOSIS

Hong Kong is playing a leading role in the worldwide battle against the killer disease -- tuberculosis.

One of the world's top specialists on TB, Dr. Wallace Fox, in collaboration with local medical services, is using Hong Kong as a field of study for a new short-term course of treatment.

In the past, patients have been given drugs to take daily at home for up to two years. This proved unsatisfactory as many sufferers took the medicine irregularly.

For nearly two years, government clinics in Hong Kong have been using a different approach to fight the disease which last year killed nearly three times the number of people that died in road accidents here.

During the first two or three months of treatment, the patient visits a clinic daily where the drug is administered under supervision. Visits are then reduced to twice a week for about 18 months.

This form of treatment has met with great success, claiming a 90 to 95 per cent cure rate.

The big disadvantage is the length of time involved and the large quantities of drugs needed. To overcome these problems, it is now thought that a much shorter course of treatment, from six to nine months, can prove just as effective although using exactly the same drugs and dosages.

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Sunday, November 26, 1972

- 2 -

But it takes up to two years of tests and observation after the treatment has stopped before the result is known.

So Hong Kong, which has an estimated 40,000 TB sufferers, has undertaken a programme to get these results. At the moment 400 volunteer patients are taking part in the project under strict control of TB specialists. It is hoped that another 300 patients will eventually take part in the programme.

All results are being fed back to Dr. Fox, a member of the British Medical Research Council in London. Results of other tests with new drugs are also being passed on to the specialist.

Advantages of the short-term treatment are obvious -- reduced costs, time saving -- and more patients can be treated.

Last year more than 1,000 people died from TB, mostly affecting the lungs, in Hong Kong. Many of these were over 40 and had not received recent regular treatment for the disease.

A medical spokesman said the number of deaths from TB was dropping each year. In 1961, 2,100 died of the disease, and 10 years before that, despite a smaller population, more than 4,000 were dying annually. Only five years ago TB was the most common cause of death in Hong Kong, now it is fifth with cancer the major killer.

But, he said, although significant advances had been made here the disease was still a serious threat. He advised anyone who had a cough for more than two weeks to attend a government clinic.

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Sunday, November 26, 1972

- 3 -

He stressed that treatment was completely free and most patients could continue their regular working lives. Clinics operated day and evening sessions.

In most cases a simple X-ray and examination was all that was needed to set the treatment moving. If time off work was required, help from government social services could be obtained.

He also stressed that the disease was contagious and was particularly dangerous to other members of a family living in close quarters. It could kill in under five years.

The spokesman said that although 12,000 people were being treated here for TB at the end of last year there were still a great number of people endangering their own lives, as well as their families and friends by not seeking treatment.

Most sufferers were in the older age groups as there had been a big step up in vaccinations for babies and school children, he said.

Even so last year 1,250 people died from TB in Hong Kong -- compared with the 362 who died in road accidents.

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