



香港兒科基金
Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation

Press Release - For Immediate Release

Media contact
Halo PR

Dorothy Yung dorothy.yung@halo-pr.com.hk
Michelle Tang michelle.tang@halo-pr.com.hk

September 10, 2017

Up to 81% juvenile inmates have mental health problems Routine health screening is vital for protecting their physical and mental wellbeing

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* defines a *child* as any individual below the age of 18, and emphasizes that the rights of all children and youth should be protected irrespective of their race, gender and social background. *Child Health* covers different domains including physical, mental, education and social. Children in families or in community settings is not our only concern, we also care about the health of children in special situations such as children living in child care facilities, temporary placement, hospital setting, and correctional institutes. Nevertheless, the health condition of juvenile inmates in Hong Kong in particularly their mental health has been mostly neglected. While their health risks are higher than their counterparts in general population, there is no routine health screening and mental health assessment in the existing facilities taking of children and young people. The Hong Kong Paediatric Society and Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation urge the government to improve the current system to identify the potential health risks and provide early intervention, so as to protect of rights of children in special situations and to ensure their healthy growth and development. This would help to alleviate the potential problems that may develop when the young inmates return to the community.

The Surveillance Group for the Child Health Policy is concerned about the health status of juvenile inmates being neglected

The Surveillance Group for the Child Health Policy for Hong Kong has recently conducted a professional systemic review on the health challenges of children and young people living in child care facilities and correctional institutes and the possible recommendations with the aim to improve youth health at adverse situations. The Professional Panel included more than 10 child health professionals of various sectors including paediatricians, paediatric nurses, educators, clinical psychologists, legal experts and social workers. It was found that the health needs of the juvenile inmates have not been addressed under the current system.

Juvenile inmates have higher health risks. Lack of health screening and early intervention will impose detrimental consequences

Thousands of children and youth are residing in various types of child care facilities and correctional institutes in Hong Kong every year. Their health status has raised our concern. According to international studies, youngsters staying at correctional institutes are more prone to develop adverse health conditions due to previous exposure to high risk behaviours such as drug abuse, unprotected sexual experience



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and violence. About 30-39% of juvenile inmates have already showed physical health concerns at the time of custody. The Surveillance Group believed that a comprehensive screening could provide timely intervention which would prevent serious complications. Appropriate health education provided to the juvenile inmates during the detention period would also improve their future health prognosis.

International Study: Up to 81% of juvenile inmates have mental health problems during detention

The Surveillance Group found that the health needs of the juvenile inmates were being neglected. Although general medical services are provided in the correctional institutes, juvenile inmates have other specific health needs such as higher health risks, personal developmental challenges and emotional problems. An international study revealed that 40-95% of children and youth already had mental health problems before they were sent to child care facilities or institutes. “Another literature review showed that 45-81% of juvenile inmates had mental health disorder, 40-50% of juvenile inmates with substance misuse and 63% showing suicidal or self-harm risks.” said Dr. WONG Hiu Lei, Lilian, Past President of the Hong Kong Paediatric Society, Secretary General of the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation.

At present, there is no systematic health screening and mental health assessment for juvenile inmates in Hong Kong. Because of that, their health risks may be unnoticed until the situation getting worse. The juvenile inmates are emotionally vulnerable as they are deprived of family support and may have difficulties in adjusting to the new environment. If they have not received proper care in addressing their needs, their physical and mental health development may be affected, which may lead to other social issues.

“It is highly recommended that a comprehensive screening for physical, mental health and high risk behaviours should be provided in the first 48 hours when these juvenile inmates are firstly admitted, so that timely treatment and assessment of the need of continuation of medications can be implemented,” said Dr. Wong.

Lack of education or vocation training for juvenile inmates up to six months to three years during the trial or unsentenced period

Proper personal development is one of the important health assets of children and youth when dealing with the new health challenges. However, youth in detention are not receiving any education or vocational training when they are in trial or during the unsentenced period. The period could be as long as 6 months to 3 years.

“We recommend all young inmates during the trial or unsentenced period should enjoy the rights of education. The government should be responsible for addressing their needs,” according to Dr. Wong.



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“Youth Justice” is not the concept in existing Correctional System in Hong Kong

“Youth justice” is a more widely adopted concept in USA, Europe and Australia in recent years with emphasis on rehabilitation and treatment rather than punishment. It stresses on understanding the motivation of the crime committed, identifying the risk factors, solving the underlying problems and building up the resilience of young people. “Would there be better options in dealing with young inmates other than punishment and correctional measures? During the detention period, it is helpful to let juvenile inmates understand the responsibility of their crime and the impact to the victims as well as providing suitable guidance in order to help them to be back on track,” according to Dr. Wong.

While governments of many countries are proactively revising their strategies of correctional services with emphasis on *Youth Justice* and promoting physical and mental health of juvenile inmates, the Hong Kong government is still sticking to correctional concept.

Establish the Child Health Policy for Hong Kong and Appoint the Children’s Commissioner

The government has been adopting piece-meal strategies in tackling issues of children and youngsters and turning a blind eye to the problems if there are no public noises. The rights of children and youth should be properly respected irrespective to their social background. Unfortunately, the Government has not formulated a comprehensive Child Health Policy for Hong Kong and the current policies are not child-focused. We need to have a *Child Health Policy* and a dedicated Children’s Commissioner to lead the independent *Children’s Commission* to supervise and evaluate the implementation of the *Child Health Policy*,” said Dr. CHAN Chok Wan, Chairman of the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation and the Past President of the International Pediatric Association.

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The Hong Kong Paediatric Society

Formed in 1962, the missions of the society are to advance the knowledge of child health care, to maintain high standard of child health care, to promote child health through public education and to foster comradeship. www.medicine.org.hk/hkps/

The Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation

The Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation is a charitable organization wholly owned by the Hong Kong Paediatric Society. It was established in 1994 by child health professionals from intersectoral domains and community celebrities for promotion of child health and child advocacy through public education. www.hkpr.org.hk



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Appendix 1 :

Key recommendations from the Hong Kong Paediatric Society and the Hong Kong Paediatric Foundation on improving the health status of juvenile inmates at child care facilities and correctional institutes :

● Health aspects :

- Health check-up in the first 48 hours of admission to child health facilities and institutes to exclude emergencies, infectious diseases and assess the need for continuous use of drugs. Within one week after arriving at the institute, a full health check-up and psychiatric assessment shall be provided. Sexually active young people should be screened for sexually transmitted diseases in order to provide appropriate treatment and referral.
- All institutes should provide timely mental health services to address acute and chronic mental health conditions and emotional problems, including screening for suicidal risk and taking appropriate preventive measures. Timely mental health assessment should be provided to young people with history of taking psychiatric drugs or having substance abuse in order to review the need for continued drug treatment.
- Provide health education to reduce future health risks of young inmates.

● A conceptual change in juvenile correctional system

- “Youth Justice” instead of “Correctional” should be adopted. Try to identify the motivation of the crime committed, the risk factors and the underlying problems.
- Establish an independent and transparent feedback and complaint mechanism and improve communication between young inmates and correctional staff.

● Other recommendations :

- Take care of the wellbeing of babies born in prison by female inmates. Facilitate the babies to enjoy the same rights as other children including the opportunity of breastfeeding and continuous maternal bonding. Collaborate with social welfare organizations to ensure appropriate developmental support and care for the babies.
- Ensure youth in detention enjoying the same education opportunity during the trial or unsentenced period.

● Long-term direction :

- Establish a comprehensive Child Health Policy for Hong Kong which better addresses the health needs of our children and creates a better future for our children.
- Appoint a Children’ s Commissioner to supervise the independent Children’ s Commission and to report directly to the Chief Executive of HKSAR, to supervise and evaluate the implementation of the Child Health Policy.