

## **Why Eradicating Hepatitis B and Liver Cancer should be a National Priority in China**

### **根除乙肝和肝癌-中国首要任务**

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If you judge by the focus of international and media reports, you would think that HIV/AIDS, SARS, and the avian flu, are the major health problems facing China today. An estimated 17,000 people died of HIV in 1999, and by 2003, approximately a million people in China is living with HIV. In response to this rising threat, a national plan for AIDS prevention and control (1998-2010) has been developed and adopted. During the SARS outbreak in 2003, 5327 people in China were infected and 349 died of SARS. To date, there has been no report of death from avian flu in China. In contrast, hepatitis B which poses the greatest threat to the health of the nation has received little attention. One in ten Chinese (130 million) has chronic hepatitis B. In China, every 60 seconds, a person die from liver cancer or liver failure caused by hepatitis B. Hepatitis B is the greatest health threat and the “silent killer” in the Chinese community.

China has the greatest burden of hepatitis B and liver cancer in the world. Of the 350-400 million people with chronic hepatitis B, a third of them live in China. Hepatitis B is transmitted the same way as HIV/AIDS and not by food or casual contact. Many Chinese became infected at childbirth when the mother is a hepatitis B carrier. Others became infected by injections or cuts with needles, syringes, medical or dental instruments, and blood contaminated with hepatitis B, or from unprotected sex. Most chronically infected individuals don't even know they have been infected because they often feel perfectly healthy. By the time symptoms developed, it is often too late. The reason chronic hepatitis B is so dangerous is because without treatment or regular screening for liver cancer, one in four chronically infected person will eventually die of liver cancer or liver failure. Many die at their prime of live and as early as 30 years of age when they have many family responsibilities. Each year, an estimated half a million Chinese die of liver cancer or liver failure caused by hepatitis B.

What is so tragic is that hepatitis B and liver cancer is largely preventable. The hepatitis B vaccine is a safe and effective vaccine that can protect the uninfected Chinese population from HBV infection and the development of liver cancer. For this reason, the Center of Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) in the US called the HBV vaccine the first “anti-cancer vaccine”. And even for those who have chronic HBV infection (often referred to as HBV carriers), most could lead normal, working lives. Many will not die with treatment of hepatitis B to prevent further damage to the liver, and regular monitoring to detect the cancer at an early stage when it could be successfully treated.

The health of the young people in China holds the key to the future of the country. Children under the age of 18 years comprise of 29% of the population of China and 19 million babies are born every year. Although the adoption of a national policy since January 1<sup>st</sup> 2002, to provide newborn with free HBV vaccination is an important initial step towards reducing the incidence of hepatitis B, many children and young adults are left vulnerable to HBV infection. Many parents and healthcare providers are still not sufficiently informed about the benefits and importance of the HBV vaccine. Lessons learnt from the CDC in the US from a 20-year experience show that an effective HBV vaccination strategy must target not only the newborn, but provide HBV screening for all pregnant women, and catch-up vaccination for all children and young adults who remain vulnerable to infection. Special programs to increase awareness and education of the parents and healthcare providers are important in improving the completion rates of the three-dose vaccine.

Despite the prevalence of hepatitis B and liver cancer in the Chinese community, many including physicians are not aware of the risk, the association of hepatitis B and liver cancer, the importance of HBV vaccination to prevent liver cancer, and the need for hepatitis B carriers to have regular liver cancer screening. Many are further confused about how hepatitis B is transmitted creating unfounded prejudices against those who are chronically infected. The Asian Liver Center at Stanford University was founded in 1996 with the goal of eradicating hepatitis B worldwide and reduces the incidence and motility of liver cancer through a three-pronged approach: research, treatment, and prevention and early detection through education and advocacy. The Jade Ribbon Campaign to fight hepatitis B and liver cancer was launched in 2001 by the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University. Partners of the campaign include the CDC, federal and state health agencies, and hundreds of community organizations and corporations. The campaign aims to raise awareness and educate both the public and the healthcare communities about the importance of hepatitis B testing and vaccination, and the prevention of liver cancer. We picked the color “jade” because it brings good luck and good health. Folded like the Chinese character meaning “people”, the Jade Ribbon is symbolic of the spirit of the campaign in uniting the people throughout the world together to eliminate hepatitis B and liver cancer, and build a healthier community.

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