

# \$4m earmarked to fight hepatitis

By FIONA CHAN

AT least \$4 million is to be spent this summer expanding Hongkong's hepatitis B vaccination programme to protect children aged between three and six.

The Director of Health, Dr Lee Shiu-hung, yesterday said children in this age bracket - totalling about 150,000 in the territory - were highly susceptible to the disease.

They stood a higher chance of developing chronic liver problems after infection, he said.

The existing vaccination programme for newborns began on November 15, 1988, and therefore children aged three years or older have not been covered.

But the department has no immediate plans to expand the scheme to cover adults.

Already about 10 per cent of the territory's adult population are hepatitis B carriers, while another 30 per cent who had been infected with the disease have developed immunity.

Dr Lee said \$4 million would be needed to buy vaccines, with each child having to receive three doses for maximum protection.

THE Hospital Authority's director of operations Dr Yeoh Eng-kiong yesterday told legislators that essential medical resources were provided on a territory-wide basis, rather than concentrating on individuals.

His remarks came after legislators had expressed concern about an imbalance in funds allocated to the Prince of Wales (PWH) and Queen Elizabeth hospitals during Wednesday's public works sub-committee.

Dr Yeoh said he had sent a representative to brief members at Wednesday's meeting, but by the time his staff got there discussion on the hospital was already over.

Legislators were told during yesterday's Finance Committee meeting that the authority did not distinguish one hospital from another when allocating cash and that it provided ser-

vices for people all over Hongkong, not allocate money on a geographical basis.

Compared with the Queen Mary Hospital in which 80 per cent of patients lived on the Hongkong Island, more than 90 per cent of patients in the PWH lived in the New Territories, he said.

Legislator and authority member Mr Peter Wong Hong-yuen asked when the administration would take action in the light of a shortfall in hospital beds.

Dr Yeoh assured that two projects to increase the number of beds in the New Territories were in the pipeline which could be completed by 1996.

Councillors also approved \$493 million to refurbish Queen Elizabeth Hospital.

The free vaccination service will be available at all maternal and child health centres from July.

Hepatitis B is a killer viral disease which currently costs the lives of two million people a year worldwide.

In Hongkong, liver cancer is the second major cause of cancer death after lung cancer and the Hepatitis B virus is thought to cause at least 80 per cent of those liver cancer cases and two-thirds of all liver cirrhosis cases.

Dr Lee described the general level of health of children as "good" because of the low infant mortality rate - just 6.5 per 1,000 births.

Also, the maternal mortality rate was only six per 100,000 total births last year - one of the lowest in the world.

At a review yesterday, Dr Lee said cancer and heart and hypertension diseases were still the leading killers in the territory last year.

"The leading causes of death in Hongkong are similar to those in technically advanced countries," he said.

The mortality rate of cancer last year was 153.82 per 100,000 population, 47.1 per cent more than 20 years ago.

That of heart diseases was 84.78 per 100,000 population, or 14.3 per cent more than in 1971.

Dr Lee said the Government would step up its education and publicity in encouraging public awareness of a healthy life including diet, no smoking and more exercise.

The Government would also send the message through the district health system.

At present, the department is planning to introduce a pilot district health scheme in Kwun Tong.

Dr Lee reiterated that primary health care would not be adversely affected by the Government's austerity drive because the department would be more cost-effective in providing sufficient services for the public.