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\$1.1b hepatitis exercise

By WONG JOON SAN

HONGKONG would have to spend about \$1.1 billion to vaccinate the entire population against hepatitis B at present market prices of the vaccines.

According to an editorial in the latest edition of the influential *Hongkong Medical Association Journal*, the President of the Hongkong Association for the Study of Liver Diseases, Dr Yeoh Eng-kiong, says the exercise would be an unnecessary waste of money.

Also, hepatitis B virus carriers would be lulled into believing they were being protected from infection

and this could lead to disputes and claims at a later date for alleged "vaccination failures", he said.

Dr Yeoh said about half of the local Chinese population had been exposed to the hepatitis B virus and about 9½ per cent of them were carriers.

He recommended that instead of vaccinating the entire population, those who were at substantial risk of infection and or becoming carriers should be identified and vaccinated.

Dr Yeoh said peri-natal transmission accounted for about 45 per cent of the carriers in the community and antenatal screening showed

that 1 per cent of pregnant women were carriers.

Earlier this week two visiting hepatitis experts said the entire population of Hongkong should be vaccinated against the infection, beginning with those in the high risk groups.

Professor Blaine Hollinger, from Baylor College in the United States, said it was important for people in the Orient, who face a high risk of contracting the fatal infection, to be screened and vaccinated.

He was supported by Smith Kline-RIT's clinical research manager from Belgium, Dr Assad Safary.