

Abandoned babies 'left in institutes'

By HELEN SIGNY

ABANDONED children are being placed in mental homes, even though they are not retarded, until families can be found to adopt them, welfare workers have found.

They blame poor assessment and monitoring of children in government care, plus a lack of facilities and the reluctance of families to adopt children with "special needs".

The managing director of adoption charity Mother's Choice, Ms Helen Stephens, said some children had been diagnosed as mentally retarded when in fact their development was delayed due to months spent in institutions.

"This is the situation in Hongkong. You couldn't say there are hundreds, but there are some, and even if there is one it is one too many," Ms Stephens said.

She called for clearer guidelines to be drawn up in the diagnosis of retarded and developmentally delayed children.

One child, 28-month-old Ka-lok, had been brought up with a group of mentally handicapped children in the Caritas Medical Centre after he was wrongly diagnosed as mentally retarded because he only had one eye, she said.

Consultant paediatrician at the Caritas Medical Centre, Dr Alex Chan Kwok-hing, said when Ka-lok was a baby, doctors suspected him of having a certain syndrome which led to mental retardation due to his physical appearance.

But as he grew older, staff realised he was normal but developmentally delayed from the months spent in the mentally handicapped unit.

When the paediatrics department took over the running of the hospital's 300-bed unit for the severely

mentally handicapped on April 1, Dr Chan identified a group of children in the unit who were only slightly retarded, he said.

"They will be trained separately but have to stay in the unit because they have no parents to look after them.

"We know it's not ideal for this group to stay with the severely mentally handicapped. They tend to stick to each other. These less retarded identify their own grade," he added.

The latest Social Welfare Department figures show 59 children were waiting for adoption at the end of February, 51 of whom were classed as having special needs.

Of those, 40 were disabled, about 20 of them mentally handicapped. Ten of them were over five years-old and had been wards of the Government for several years.

Mrs Rosaline Lee Pang Siu-wan, adoption programme co-ordinator for International Social Service, which places children with special needs in homes overseas, criticised local assessment services.

"I'd question whether they are sufficient and the people taking care of the children are monitoring them properly," she said.

"Sometimes children need multiple services. It's not just a matter of intelligence, but they may have vision or hearing problems.

Mr Jonathan Chamberlain, of the Down's Syndrome Association, said children often had to wait one or two years for assessment due to a lack of facilities.

When children are abandoned they are sent temporarily to the Social Welfare Department's Chuk Yuen Children's Reception Centre, and their condition is assessed by the Department of

Health, usually at the Arran Street Child Assessment Centre.

Those with poor medical conditions are then placed in the Caritas Medical Centre, while others are found places in subvented homes including Pinehill Village, Po Leung Kuk and St Christopher's Home.

The Chuk Yuen superintendent, Ms Elaine Ma Yulin, said nurses and voluntary workers did their best to integrate physically disabled children with other children.

"If they [the physically disabled] can integrate with the normal children, then we integrate them. But some cannot because of their physical disabilities, and the staff cannot cope with them," she said.

A Department of Health spokesman said Arran Street Child Assessment Centre, which serves children below 12, provided "comprehensive physical, psychological and social assessment".

The centre assessed 1,478 cases last year, with about five months' waiting time between an initial interview and a full assessment, he added.

Mother's Choice, which has a smaller staff-to-patient ratio than most government facilities, is to take in three children with special needs to provide them with closer attention before they are adopted overseas.

From 1988 to 1989, 41 children with special needs were adopted overseas and 40 the following year, compared with 49 normal children and 111 in 1990 who were adopted locally.

Mother's Choice and the Social Welfare Department have appealed for families to come forward to adopt the children with special needs currently under the care of the Government.

Deserted by their parents at birth; wrongly diagnosed as mentally disabled; placed in institutions; and finally sent overseas to find homes. HELEN SIGNY reports on the plight of the territory's children with special needs.

TWO-year-old Ka-lok, a normal, intelligent child, has been in a mental institution all his life waiting for someone to come along and adopt him — just because he has one eye.

After he was abandoned at birth, he was wrongly diagnosed as suffering from a syndrome resulting in mental retardation because of physical defects including the lack of an eye.

But as he grew older, staff at the Caritas Medical Centre's mentally handicapped unit, which houses 300 children, realised Ka-lok was not mentally retarded after all.

The centre's consultant paediatrician, Dr Alex Chan Kwok-hing, whose department took over the mentally handicapped unit on April 1, said there were several children living among the severely mentally handicapped who did not have serious mental disabilities.

"We are aware there are a few cases who are not that severely mentally retarded admitted to the mentally handicapped unit in the Caritas Medical Centre," Dr Chan said.

"The reason behind it is because they were referred very early and so the initial assessment may not be that accurate," he added.

Adoption charity Mother's Choice has received special permission to care for Ka-lok until a family can be found to adopt him.

"Now his development is speeding up, he understands he's different and it's very, very difficult for him," Mother's Choice managing director, Ms Helen Stephens, said.

The Government usually asks parents of children with special needs to monitor their progress and provide the stimulation necessary for them to develop.

But physically handicapped or developmentally-delayed children who have been abandoned by their parents, and become wards of the Government while the difficult task of finding an adoptive family is underway, have been known to be housed in mental institutions as there is nowhere else for them.

Welfare agencies blame poor assessment and monitoring of their condition, plus a lack of facilities in Hongkong.

Ms Stephens said: "If a child is physically handicapped in this particular society, it seems they automatically presume they have mental problems as well.

"I think in Hongkong there has been a history that these handicapped kids and orphans have been hidden away."

The charity was also trying to take in a 16-month-old Vietnamese girl who had spent all her life in a cot by herself and appeared to be mentally retarded.

"Now she cannot bear to be touched or held — she screams because she's not used to human contact," Ms Stephens said.

"Consequently she's going

'Very often it's assumed that because they are physically handicapped, they are mentally handicapped. This I think is an absolute scandal in Hongkong.'

to be at a six-month developmental level: she's not retarded, but just developmentally delayed."

One child had spent most of her life in a group of mentally retarded children at the Social Welfare Department's Chuk Yuen Children's Reception Centre, and had even started to mimic their movements and characteristics.

But it turned out, after she was adopted by a US couple three years ago, that the delay in her development was due to the months she had spent in hospital, and she was, in fact, of average intelligence.

Another child did not speak until she was nearly four years

old, leading workers to believe she was mentally retarded. But special medical attention after she was adopted by a family in the US revealed she was nearly deaf.

Mr Jonathan Chamberlain, of the Down's Syndrome Association, agreed there could be cases of wrong diagnosis.

"It is quite easy to do in the cases of people who are spastic or have cerebral palsy — very often it's assumed that because they are physically handicapped, they are mentally handicapped," he said.

"This I think is an absolute scandal in Hongkong, and very few people seem to take exception to it.

"And it's not just confined to Hongkong, but anywhere where resources are scarce, physically and mentally handicapped children are put together."

Disabled children who become wards of the Government — so the Director of Social Welfare is their legal guardian — are classified as children with special needs and automatically referred for overseas adoption.

The Social Welfare Department is looking for families to adopt 59 children, 51 of whom are classified as having special needs, which can also include older children and those with problem backgrounds, according to the Chief Social Worker, family and child care, Mrs Katherine Shin Yeung Kwan-man.

There were 40 disabled children for whom adopters could not be found, the majority of whom were abandoned at birth, she said.

Mrs Shin admitted there had been cases of wards of the Government being housed with mentally handicapped children.

"I think there are only very few cases. For young children it's very difficult to determine whether they are intelligent or mentally handicapped, or just a slow learner," she said.

"Although we can say a hospital is very well run and there is very good care, I really do think if a child has a parent with constant care and regular contact and a lot of stimulation, it



Waiting for adoption: special needs children at Chuk Yuen children's reception centre.

would be better for the child's development."

Abandoned children are usually placed in Chuk Yuen Children's Reception Centre until long term provisions are made for them.

Mrs Rosaline Lee Pang Siu-wan, the adoption programme co-ordinator for International Social Service, which places children with special needs in homes overseas, said it was not usually the institutions' fault that some children were grouped with the mentally handicapped.

"It's not just putting children who are not mentally handicapped among mentally handicapped children.

"I'm sure the institutions which are providing the care would never think of mixing the two groups together if they had sufficient assessment services telling them that this child can function like a normal child," she said.

Children are usually assessed by the Department of Health's Arran Street Child Assessment Centre or other centres in Sha Tin and Kwun Tong.

The centre, which serves children with developmental problems, had a team to assess physical, intellectual and emotional aspects, a Department of Health spokesman said.

"Children attending the centres will not be unnecessarily labelled as mentally retarded," he said.

"The diagnosis of mental retardation is based on the patient's reported and observed adaptive behaviour complemented by performance on test scales.

"As mental-intellectual development varies with age, the results of early developmental assessment should not be used for prediction of future functioning," he added.

The Superintendent of Chuk Yuen, Ms Elaine Ma Yu-lin, said it was impossible to give each child individual attention as with 63 staff working over three shifts, there was one worker to every eight children.

But voluntary church and school groups visited the centre regularly, and most children were able to go outside to play two or three times a week.

In her three years at the centre, she had never seen one child with special needs adopted locally, she said.

Almost all of the children with special needs who are adopted go overseas, most of them to the United States.

About 40 to 50 children with special needs are placed overseas every year, but Mrs Shin said there were some adults in Hongkong who had been waiting in institutions all their lives.

"The older they get the harder it is ... and some of them maybe don't have pretty faces."

Mrs Shin said local couples were usually unwilling to adopt disabled children as they were usually childless themselves and therefore did not have enough child care experience to look after those with special needs.

She appealed for local couples to come forward to give a home to the children waiting in institutions.

"Institutions are a last resort. If there are other alternatives, home care is not the best. No matter how well it is run there is no comparison with a family," she said.