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\$10m bill may halt lead probe

Commissioning consultants to carry out a much-needed survey of lead pollution in Hongkong would cost about \$10 million, a Government environmental expert has estimated.

And it was learned yesterday that at least one member of the Special Committee on Air Pollution was sceptical about the prospects of spending such a large amount.

At a cost of \$10 million, he thought the study was a "non-starter."

The SCM Post understands that the Environmental Protection Agency is now considering the cost and feasibility of the proposals on lead in the environment made by two British experts.

The two experts, Dr Iain Thornton of Imperial College, London, and Dr Donald Bartrop, head of the Department of Child Health at Westminster Hospital Medical School, had pointed out that there was "prima facie evidence of an unacceptable degree of exposure to lead in at least part of the population of Hongkong."

In their report on lead pollution in Hongkong they also said that three paediatric units in local hospitals had diagnosed "severe, life threatening" lead poisoning in children in the past two years.

Both concluded that a comprehensive evaluation of lead in the environment and its impact on the population is required, and that such a programme would have to be

locally co-ordinated but would require external assistance some aspects.

It was learned that originally it had been thought that external funding might be secured for the exercise on the basis of its research value. But that is now considered a very remote prospect.

The SCM Post understands that if funds for the purpose were to be sought from the Government, the study would need to be more fact-related, and designed to provide the sort of information required for the formulation of executive decisions.

The Government environmental expert said that it might be necessary to consider commissioning professional consultants to carry out the study — at a cost which he estimated would be in the region of \$10 million.

Another Government source said that if the study was to be paid for by Government, it would not be research-orientated but directed at establishing the extent of the lead problem, identifying the principal sources of pollution and recommending how they should be dealt with.

He said this was not the sort of task that could be assigned to a researcher.

But the SCAP member thought that the Government would be most "unlikely to agree to making a sum of this magnitude available for the purpose".