

Hong Kong Sanatorium & Hospital Allergy Centre Provides One-Stop Allergy Diagnosis and Treatment

(31 May, 2012 – Hong Kong) In March 2012, the Allergy Centre of Hong Kong Sanatorium & Hospital (“HKSH”) came into service. Headed by Dr. Tak Lee, one of the world-renowned authorities on allergy treatment and prevention and a specialist in respiratory medicine, the Centre is the first-of-its-kind in Hong Kong, providing comprehensive tests and treatments catered for different types of allergies in adults and children. It also features the first dedicated Allergy Kitchen for food allergy testing and patient education, which together with other state-of-the-art facilities, is committed to promoting clinical research and raising public awareness of allergy.

“HKSH has always been committed to providing comprehensive and quality health care services to the community,” said Dr. Walton Li, Medical Superintendent of HKSH, “Sharing the same concern with Dr. Tak Lee for the rising demand for allergy treatment in Hong Kong, HKSH made tremendous efforts to provide outstanding facilities and staff training for the new Allergy Centre. And we are honoured to have Dr. Lee return to his birthplace and become the Centre’s Director, serving the community with his invaluable expertise.” added Dr. Li.

Dr. Tak Lee has over 30 years of experience in clinical practice, training and research in the United Kingdom, serving in numerous capacities including being the inaugural Director of the Medical Research Council and Asthma UK Centre in Allergic Mechanisms of Asthma at King’s College London and Imperial College London, Clinical Professor at King’s College London, President of the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology, Head of Asthma and Allergy at Guy’s and St. Thomas’ NHS Hospitals in London, and Chairman of the UK Royal College of Physicians and Royal College of Pathologists Joint Committee for Immunology and Allergy. Dr. Lee has published over 400 papers and reviews on asthma and allergy. The objective of his research is to inform development of new treatments and approaches to prevention. His work addresses key unresolved questions in asthma and allergy research for patient benefit.

“In my view, the Allergy Centre has the potential to be the best centre of its type in the region, and I will be hoping to collaborate with colleagues to build a multi-disciplinary team, providing what I call a ‘one-stop-shop’ for patients’ convenience,” said Dr. Lee.

Rising Prevalence of Allergy: Affecting Over Half a Million of People in Hong Kong

By definition, allergies are abnormal reactions of the immune system that occur in response to otherwise normal substances. Such substances, including animal products, house dust mites, drugs, foods, insect stings, mold spores and plant pollens, are called allergens. The body’s immune system reacts by producing an antibody (IgE) against the allergen. When the allergen and IgE meet on the surface of certain types of cells, e.g. mast cells and basophils, there is a release of very powerful chemicals, such as histamine, which cause wide-ranging symptoms like a runny nose, asthma, hives and in extreme cases, life-threatening anaphylaxis.

Approximately 8% of people in Hong Kong are now suffering from allergies that include food allergy; skin allergy such as eczema; asthma; or allergic rhinitis. In HK children asthma affects about 10% of the population; rhinitis 30%; eczema 5%; and food allergy 5%. With an estimated 40% of Hong Kong children currently suffering from different kinds of allergies, the demand for allergy treatment has never been higher.

“Allergy is a serious, sometimes life-threatening condition. In general, the richer the country, the more prevalent the allergies. However, too often it is misunderstood as a purely respiratory or dermatological problem. The lack of understanding about allergy could delay proper diagnosis and treatment, making patients suffer unnecessarily,” said Dr. Lee.

Deciphering the Cause: 50% of Asthma and 30% of Eczema are Allergic

“Allergy is even more common among local asthmatic patients including children. About 50% of asthma patients are allergic. About 30% of babies and toddlers with eczema have food allergies, and 80% of babies with eczema will end up with asthma. Asthma and allergy often go hand-in-hand, and in some cases asthmatic symptoms turn out to be attributable to food allergy after accurate diagnosis,” added Dr. Lee.

Patient’s Sharing 1: Allergic Asthma

Ms. Wu is 50 years old. She began to develop asthma at the age of 44 about the time her menopause started. She had been seeing a number of specialists for her breathing difficulties and exhausting every possible means including herbal medicine and Chinese medicine. The situation only worsened with frequent hospital admissions, and difficulties in carrying out normal daily activities.

It was only after she consulted with Dr. Lee that the cause of her asthma was identified as being due to salicylate intolerance. Salicylates are commonly found in ripe fruits, berries, raisins, curry powder, tomato paste, alcohol and a number of other foods. Following Dr. Lee’s advice, she fully recovered after 3 weeks of avoiding any salicylate containing substances, ending her years of frequent asthmatic attacks. “I feel like getting my life back,” said Ms. Wu, “Though it takes a lot of effort and discipline, I will do my best to avoid the foods I’m allergic to.”

Patient’s Sharing 2: Allergic Eczema

Mr. and Mrs. Law have two sons, 2-year-old Ivan and 7-month-old Jason. Both little boys have eczema since birth. In the worst days, there were rashes all over their bodies, which were extremely itchy that the little hands couldn’t help scratching until they bled. Ivan’s conditions worsened with the introduction of solid foods, though the parents had given him the “less risky” food, such as pork and chicken to start with. It is commonly believed that soy-based formula is “safer” for eczematous babies, but Jason’s eczema got worse after changing to soy-based formula. The parents had tried many ways to soothe the pain of

the sleepless and crying babies, including the use of medicated cream and bath oils, but to no avail. The application of steroids alleviated the problem for a while but no long term cure was attained.

After consultation, Dr. Lee ordered a blood test for Ivan and a skin test for Jason. The results indicated that Ivan is allergic to cow's milk, egg, pork, chicken, peanut and shellfish but not to soya, and Jason is allergic to cow's milk, egg and soya. This is contrary to the "common belief" that certain foods are more or less allergic than others and family members should be allergic to the same foods. Within a month, both Ivan and Jason's eczema improved by avoiding the foods they are allergic to and in the case of Jason changed to hydrolyzed formula.

"We were clueless before and now we are hopeful to have the causes identified. Close monitoring with Dr. Lee's help and advice throughout their growth and development is important," said Mr. Law. "With the help of a dietitian, we learn how to shop for allergen-free food, how to select food to ensure a balanced diet and also how to manage the kitchen to avoid cross-contamination."

Ms. June Chan, Senior Dietitian of the Centre who received a 10-week intensive course with Dr. Lee's team in the UK to broaden her knowledge of allergy, said, "Aside from letting them know that the child needs to bring his own food, we need to take into account the risks of contamination in social settings. We also need to design methods of food storage and preparation to be strictly carried out by parents, as allergens can linger for 6 months in a home if it is handled incorrectly. For instance, an allergic child's foods should be prepared first, and special detergent might be needed to remove proteins, which can adhere to cooking utensils when heated."

One-stop Investigation with State-of-the-Art Facilities

Dr. Lee obtains clues leading to any possible allergic cause(s) of a patient's symptoms from a detailed medical history, specific investigations including food diaries, blood tests, skin tests, lung function tests. Challenge tests are conducted as appropriate to either confirm the causes of allergy, or to definitively ascertain that the problem is not allergy at all. (For details of each test, please refer to the pamphlet "Allergy Centre" and to Dr. Lee's slides).

Hong Kong-first Allergy Kitchen for Food Challenge

Oral food challenges are the gold-standard of food allergy diagnosis. "Food challenge comes into play when routine tests show ambiguous results, or when food intolerance, not allergy is suspected. A food challenge involves eating incremental amounts of the suspected food allergen, often under supervision to see whether there is any reaction, thereby pinpointing the allergen." said June. "Such tests are rarely available in Hong Kong, due to the limited awareness of the severity of food allergies."

The dedicated Allergy Kitchen for investigation of food allergy is rarely available in other allergy centres around the world. Foods are prepared separately without seasonings and in different ways for food challenge tests. This allows pinpointing of the exact allergen and/or preparation method which give rise to the allergic reaction. The dedicated kitchen is crucial to the accuracy of food challenge tests by preventing cross-contamination between different food substances and cooking utensils. All cooking utensils and containers are washed thoroughly before and after use to remove any remaining allergens.

Food challenges or skin prick tests (SPT) are performed in a specially designed negative pressure room to ensure that "no allergen enters the general clinic area from the challenge room to affect other patients," said Ms. Asenath Lee, Registered Nurse of the Centre who also went through the UK's course with June.

Food Allergy and Food Intolerance

Usually mistaken for food allergy, food intolerance also gives rise to abnormal and delayed symptoms after contact with certain foods. A common example is lactose intolerance, which is characterized by such symptoms as abdominal gas, bloating, cramps and diarrhea.

Food intolerance can only be diagnosed with elimination, i.e. entire removal of a suspected food substance from diet within a specific period for signs of symptom resolution, followed by reintroduction of the suspected food or ingredients.

Allergy is Curable, and in the future, Preventable

“The majority of treatment approaches only treat the symptoms of allergic diseases. However, 62% of patients receiving optimal standard symptomatic treatment experience poor symptom control,” said Dr. Lee. “If the cause(s) can be identified and avoided cure is possible.” Currently, avoidance and immunotherapy or desensitization are the two major treatments of allergy.

Avoidance

It means minimizing or refraining from contact with allergens or allergen-containing substances in one’s daily life. In cases of food allergy or intolerance, the Centre’s dietitian will assess one’s nutritional needs and prescribe a diet to meet one’s daily requirements. Asthma can be mitigated if the triggering allergens are identified and avoided, reducing reliance on medication.

Immunotherapy / Desensitization

Avoidance, while essential, is not the only approach. Immunotherapy (“IT”) / desensitization may be adopted to effect substantial improvement in allergic symptoms. It involves the administration of increasing doses of the provoking allergen either by the sublingual (oral vaccines) or subcutaneous route (subcutaneous injections) to desensitize the patient. It is a long-established treatment which is used widely all over the world with proven benefits.

In cases of allergy caused by house dust mites, 3 years of immunotherapy are sufficient to effect substantial clinical improvement. “The new treatment using sublingual drops (oral immunotherapy) is rarely available in Hong Kong up to now and the Centre has introduced it routinely into clinical practice. This will greatly benefit children who do not normally like to have injections. ” said Dr. Lee.

Training and Research for the Future

Looking into the future, “Prevention is one of the most important questions in allergy research. We need to think of ways to stop the allergy from happening altogether,” said Dr. Lee. “For instance, we may be able to prevent some types of allergies from developing by building up a tolerance for certain allergens through dietary introduction at an opportune time. Further research supported by both the US and UK governments is already in progress to address this novel hypothesis.”

Dr. Lee is determined to drive forward in his quest to help the population with allergic diseases, “We will keep looking for innovative ways to help allergic patients, to meet their needs and to train a new generation of allergists. If we succeed, it will benefit patients not only in Hong Kong and the Mainland, but the rest of the world as well.”

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About Hong Kong Sanatorium & Hospital

Hong Kong Sanatorium & Hospital is one of the leading private hospitals in Hong Kong. With the motto “Quality in Service Excellence in Care”, the Hospital is committed to serving the public as well as promoting medical education and research.

Photos

1. Dr. Lee Tak Hong (centre), Director of Allergy Centre is welcomed by Dr. Walton Li (fifth from the right), Medical Superintendent of HKSH, Mr. Wyman Li (fifth from the left), Manager (Administration) of HKSH, Dr. Joseph Chan (fourth from the right), Deputy Medical Superintendent of HKSH and Ms. Manbo Man (third from the left), Director of Nursing Services of HKSH.



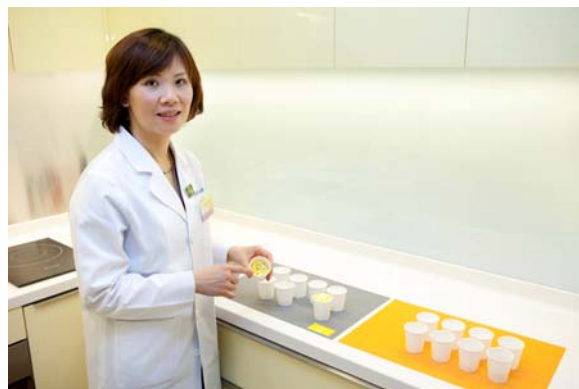
2. Allergy Centre of HKSH is teamed up by a group of medical professionals which include doctor, dietitian and registered nurses – Dr. Lee Tak Hong (centre), Director of Allergy Centre, Ms. Chi Sui Fun (second from the left), Coordinator of Allergy Centre, Ms. June Chan, Senior Dietitian of Allergy Centre (second from the right) and Ms. Asenath Lee (first from the right), Registered Nurse of Allergy Centre.



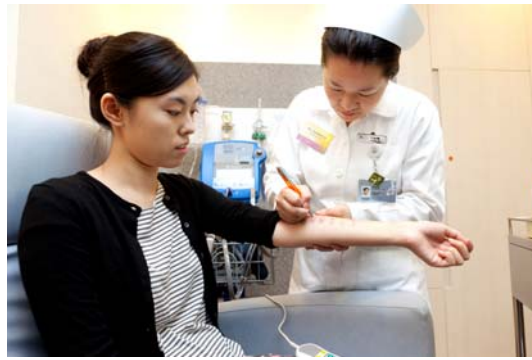
3. Dr. Tak Lee, Director of Allergy Centre of HKSH, explained the latest developments in allergy management.



4. In the Hong Kong's first Allergy Kitchen, Ms. June Chan, Senior Dietitian of Allergy Centre of HKSH, introduced food challenge test and explained how to avoid cross contamination of allergens.



5. Skin Prick Tests (SPT) are performed in a specially designed negative pressure room to ensure that no allergen enters the general clinic area from the challenge room to affect other patients.



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