



POKFULAM ROAD
HONG KONG
CHINA
中國香港
薄扶林道

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
Faculty of Education
香港大學教育學院

Ms Queenie Wong
Tel: (852) 2219 4270
Fax: (852) 2540 6360
Email: qlpwong@hku.hk

Press Release

Facilitate ‘aging in place’ Safe swallowing in the frail elderly living in the community and in nursing homes Press conference

Swallowing problems are commonly found in the elderly population. Studies have shown that swallowing problems may lead to poorer quality of life, malnutrition, dehydration and can even be fatal. The prevalence and impact of swallowing problems on elderly in Hong Kong are unclear. Therefore, the Swallowing Research Laboratory of the Division of Speech & Hearing Sciences, Faculty of Education, HKU, has recently conducted a study on safe swallowing in frail elderly living in the community. The study had two main focuses: 1) to investigate the prevalence of swallowing problems in elderly living in subsidized residential care service units and in elderly who are receiving subsidized community support services; and 2) to assess the swallowing management knowledge and skills in the carers from residential care service units and caregivers of home-living elderly who have swallowing problems. The study was funded by the Public Policy Research Funding Scheme.

The study was conducted in three phases: Phase I) prevalence of swallowing problems through phone survey; Phase II) impact of swallowing problems and service satisfaction through face-to-face interviews; and Phase III) carers’ knowledge and skill assessment. In Phase I, all subsidized residential care service units and community support service units for elderly in HK were invited to participate. 34 residential units and 21 support units replied and reported on the number of elderly who had swallowing problems. In Phase II, our research team visited 22 residential units and 20 support units to conduct face-to-face interviews with elderly. A total of 878 elderly (around 43% had swallowing problems) participated in the second phase. Finally in Phase III, 504 front line staff from the residential units and 93 family members who cared for frail elderly at home participated in the study.

Phase I: Prevalence of swallowing problems

The results indicated that around 30% of the elderly residents had mild swallowing problems, another 30% had moderate to severe swallowing problems. On the other hand, around 30% of the community support service users had mild swallowing problems and around 13% had moderate to severe swallowing problems.

Phase II: Impact of swallowing problems and service satisfaction

Results showed that elderly with swallowing problems had poorer quality of life than those who did not have swallowing problems. Almost all of the elderly in the residential units and 60% of those from the support units reported that they had not received any swallowing assessments and treatments in the last 12 months. Around 70% of the elderly felt that they had appropriate mealtime assistance.

Phase III: Carers swallowing management knowledge and skills

In general, the carers had good knowledge and skills in meals preparation and basic feeding (such as body posture and rate and volume of feeding). However, around 80% of the carers were not aware of some of the high risk groups for swallowing problems (such as elderly with history of head and neck cancer and Parkinson’s disease). The majority of the carers were also not aware that swallowing problems may bring about negative emotional consequences such as anxiety and depression.

For media enquiries, please contact Ms Queenie Wong, Senior Manager (Development and Communications), Faculty of Education (Tel.: 2219 4270 / Mobile: 9220 5840 / Email: qlpwong@hku.hk) Please visit <http://web.edu.hku.hk/media.php> to view the e-version of the press release. The powerpoint and photos can be downloaded at <http://www.fe.hku.hk/press/20131203/>.



Note for the photo:
Dr Karen Chan, Assistant Professor (left) and Professor Edwin Yiu, Professor (right),
Division of Speech and Hearing Sciences, Faculty of Education, HKU

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