

Editorial

Skin research in Hong Kong: now or never

Skin, the largest organ of the human body, is truly an "interdisciplinary" organ. Diseases of skin crosses the age, sex and ethnic boundaries, from epidermolysis bullosa in a newborn to pemphigoid in a geriatric patient, from pemphigoid gestationis in woman to chronic pruritic papular dermatitis in men, and from lichen amyloidosis in Asians to polymorphic light eruption in Celts. Further, management of skin diseases involves different disciplines in medicine, from molecular biology to immunology, and from dermatological histopathology to plastic surgery. There have been tremendous advances in dermatology in Asia. Sadly, when compared with neighbouring countries such as Japan, Singapore, or Korea, dermatological research in Hong Kong is still in its infancy. Or worse, embryo!

Hong Kong is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Asia and is renowned for its excellence in medical service and standards at relatively affordable costs. Along with improvement in living standards and advances in the provision of medical service after World War II, medical research in various specialties also blooms. Unfortunately, dermatology does not seem to belong to such a specialty as yet.

On literature review, it is not difficult to find scattered publications in international journals by Hong Kong investigators in various dermatological areas, namely, epidemiology of skin diseases, atopic dermatitis, laser treatment for naevus of Ota, facial lentiginosities and port wine stains, contact dermatitis, burn, toxic epidermal necrolysis, skin malignancies, pityriasis rosea, acne, and even telemedicine for skin. Thus far, there is no lack of

excellent dermatologists and physicians who, on top of their busy schedules, are interested in skin research and have contributions in the study of various skin diseases.

Nevertheless, an occasional case series here or a certain trial there would have inadequate impact on the advancement of skin research as-a-whole. We need collaborated and concerted effort. When compared with colleagues in our neighbouring countries, we are already starting late. A very late start indeed! The newly founded Dermatology Research Centre, is one such effort to bring enthusiastic minds together to work towards such goal. It does not matter if one is a formally trained dermatologist, or a physician with postgraduate qualifications in dermatology, or a plastic surgeon, or a dermato-histopathologist, or a geneticist, or a scientist, or a nurse... or indeed any body with an interest in looking after patients with skin problems. Above all, it is the enthusiasm for science and the desire to contribute that count.

Can skin research excel in Hong Kong? To answer this question in a roundabout manner, I believe that it depends on a collaborative and cohort effort paid by various parties. Certainly, supporting skin research has never been one of our government's traditions. You can be sure that there will not be funding to any substantial amount to be invested in dermatology in the next many years to come. At the university level, dermatology is probably a small-potato subspecialty, unlikely to receive much attention in development. At individual level, scattered publications in the form of a few case series or small studies are good starters but generally not good enough for building track

records. Without track records, Hong Kong is unlikely to thrive well and soar high in the midst of her Asian competitors.

Which are the areas that Hong Kong may try to establish track records? I believe that atopic dermatitis, psoriasis and pigmented skin lesions are good areas to consider. Take atopic dermatitis as an example, there is already existing local literature and references on the epidemiology, assessment, immunology and therapeutics about

the disease. Most importantly, there is no lack of a patient load. It is high time we inspected our strengths and weaknesses, join hand together to catch up with our Asian colleagues who are miles ahead of us.

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