

Editorial

Commitment of academics in dermatological research: does it ever exist in Hong Kong?

The title of the editorial in the 2005 Winter issue of *Hong Kong Journal of Dermatology & Venereology* (Volume 13, No.4) was "Skin research in Hong Kong: now or never". Our respectable fellow colleague from paediatric academic unit, who has a special interest in dermatology, had critically discussed the current situation in dermatological research in Hong Kong. While he had truly described the perplexity, he did not dig into the deeper level. As a dermatologist who has spent most of my career in the public institute, I would like to focus on the reasons behind, from a non-academic clinician's point of view.

Ever since 1928, the development and public service in dermatology has been laid on the shoulder of Social Hygiene Service, the only public institute in Hong Kong which is responsible for dermatology, venereology and leprology. Even at the best time, the number of medical staff in this service did not exceed thirty. It is astonishing that this small number of doctors has to provide service for the whole territory in the past seven decades. Despite the constrained manpower, the total patient attendances in this service exceed 400,000 per year in the past decade. To burn the candle at both ends, besides their heavy clinical duties, these staff has to contribute in the teaching of medical and nursing students, training of postgraduate doctors from different specialties, organising of various CME events, and finally the said research in dermatology. According to the health administrators' policy, this unit was a service unit in the past, it is still at present, and most likely will be in the future. The unit has never received any extra resources whatsoever for the research, which, from their point of view, lies on the university. Nevertheless, with the effort of some enthusiastic and diligent staff, small scale studies have been continuously conducted at the expense

of their own time and sometimes their own expenditure. With such a background, it would be too unrealistic to expect large-scale or high-power studies from this service as compared with that of the academic units.

Hong Kong has two excellent medical schools whose reputation is rising in the world. It is inarguable that apart from teaching, research is the main role of the university, and is so expected from Society. Being the holder of major research funds, intelligent academic staff, advanced equipments and technologies and adequate supportive staff, university should undoubtedly be the leader of research. While it is understandable that priority should be set for different areas of research, one should also consider the balance between the high end projects and the actual need of the ordinary civilians in Society. Certainly it would be easier to catch the world's attention with big topics like genome, cancer, ageing, etc. than those "minor diseases" like eczema, acne, tinea, etc. However, what look minor to us might not be minor in patients' own perceptions, and the number of skin patients in any society is high. In fact, it is sure that every one of us would have skin problems at some stage of our life. Unfortunately, ever since the last century, there is still not even a long-lasting academic post for dermatologist in Hong Kong, not to say a well-established department of dermatology in both universities. Embarrassingly, when being asked by our overseas counterparts about our academic department of dermatology, I often feel my face blushing and can only remain speechless. Our respectable academic had mentioned in the past editorial that, at the university level, dermatology was probably a small-potato subspecialty. This may be true in local scenario, but certainly this is not the case in countries like the United States,

France, Germany, United Kingdom, Japan and Australia. Their universities have extensive research in dermatology, contributing to the development in medicine for the understanding of skin diseases and benefit of mankind. At the same time, they have attracted good funding and support from the industries, and often turned their research results into practical applications with good revenue. For the benefits of thousands of our patients with incurable skin diseases, shouldn't our academics contribute at least a minimum in this field?

Dermatology in Hong Kong is now facing a deteriorating downhill course. The public health authority is only willing to have minimal commitment in dermatological service as their concern is more in sexually transmitted diseases; the Hospital Authority almost completely stays hand-off as dermatological service is not under their auspices in the present compartmented health-care system; while the universities have

their own priorities and show no signs of interest in dermatology. With such a gloomy picture, it is not surprised that more than 50% of the dermatologist fellows have left the public institute in the past three years. Certainly this is an alarming sign for the maintenance of quality service for skin patients in the public sector. As a result, there is little if any room for the only public institute to contribute further in the research, apart from some collaborative works with the universities. The academics from universities, who are regarded as the leaders in the research area, should have devoted commitment and visible action if they agree that dermatology is still needed in medicine. Blossomy results from their research is certainly more persuading than just giving some catching slogan.

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