

CHP conducts comprehensive investigation into suspected Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli infection cluster at PMH

The Head of the Communicable Disease Branch of the Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Department of Health, Dr Albert Au, said today (February 11) that the CHP is conducting a comprehensive investigation into a suspected Shiga toxin-producing Escherichia coli (STEC) infection cluster, involving three doctors in the Oncology Department of Princess Margaret Hospital (PMH), with one of them passed away on February 7.

After receiving notification from PMH yesterday (February 10), the CHP representatives, together with representatives from PMH and the Chair of Infectious Diseases of the Department of Microbiology of the University of Hong Kong (HKU), Professor Yuen Kwok-yung, conducted an inspection of the workplace of the Oncology Department and other facilities of the hospital this morning.

"The case involves three oncologists at the hospital. Initial investigation revealed that they developed symptoms on February 4, 6 and 10 respectively. Symptoms included fever, abdominal pain and diarrhea. One of them, who had onset of symptoms on February 4, was admitted to PMH for treatment on February 6 and passed away the following day. The other two affected persons had mild symptoms," Dr Au said.

"Preliminary test results showed that the stool specimen from one of the three affected persons tested positive for STEC, while that of the other two affected persons (including the deceased patient) tested negative. Taking into account the clinical and epidemiological information, the CHP tentatively believed that the cluster may be associated with STEC infection," he said.

The CHP's epidemiological and environmental investigations are ongoing. The CHP will continue to collaborate with the Hospital Authority and the Department of Microbiology of the HKU to investigate the incident and trace the potential source of infection.

PMH has strengthened the monitoring of the gastrointestinal symptoms among its staff and has requested any staff members with relevant symptoms to report immediately for laboratory tests. The PMH has also arranged comprehensive disinfection of the oncology office area.

In general, STEC infections are usually associated with the consumption of contaminated food or water, such as raw or undercooked meat products, contaminated fruits and vegetables, and unpasteurised dairy products. Direct person-to-person transmission through the faecal-oral route can also occur.