

WOMEN'S COMMISSION
Department of Health's Services and Programmes related to Women

INTRODUCTION

This paper informs Members of the range of existing health services provided by the Department of Health (DH) for women.

CONCEPT OF HEALTH

2. Health is not merely freedom from disease and infirmity. It is a state of mental, physical, social, emotional, sexual and spiritual wellbeing. For a woman, health is created and lived within everyday settings, as she moves through various stages of life. Health is about her being able to fulfil potentials and enjoy quality of life up to the last moment. The concept of health extends beyond the realms of the health sector. Everyone has a role to play to yield the largest health gain for the society.

DEPARTMENT'S MISSION

3. The DH is the Government's health adviser and agency to execute health care policies and statutory functions. It safeguards the health of the community through promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative services. Apart from 50 maternal and child health centres (MCHCs) and three women health centres (WHCs) which cater specifically for women, a wide range of other health centres/clinics¹ also serve female clients.

PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN

(A) *To increase women's control over and improve their health, DH provides the following health promotion programmes. They include –*

Breast awareness promotion

4. On an ongoing basis, DH promotes breast awareness through the MCHCs, WHCs, elderly health centres (EHCs) and Women Health

¹ General out-patient clinics, elderly health centers, chest clinics, social hygiene clinics, school dental clinics, student health service centers, and so on.

Ambassador Training Programmes. Rather than advocating ritualistic self-examination of the breasts following a routine set of steps so-called “breast screening”, the Department encourages women to observe and feel for the texture of the normal breasts at different times of the month and with advancing age. With the aid of videos, leaflets and breast models, women are taught to feel for the texture of the normal breasts so that they can detect abnormal changes early upon which immediate medical attention can be sought. For women with risk factors for breast cancer development, screening mammography may be provided at the WHCs.

Breastfeeding

5. The DH continues to promote breastfeeding among pregnant women and nursing mothers as an effective means of enhancing maternal and child wellbeing. Staff training, a breastfeeding hotline and other empowering activities are actively pursued by staff of the MCHC to create a conducive environment for breastfeeding mothers. Committed to this cause, the Department promulgates a breastfeeding policy and the Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding. With sustained promotional effort, the breastfeeding rate is expected to continue to increase.

Family planning

6. The MCHCs are strategically located throughout the territory to provide an accessible source of advice on, and methods for, family planning. Hong Kong residents pay a nominal all-inclusive fee of \$1 for each attendance.

Healthy lifestyles

7. Healthy eating, regular exercise, stress management and avoidance of tobacco use are the mainstay of health promotion and education activities of the Department. The aim is to encourage adoption of a healthy lifestyle throughout the life course so as to defer the onset of chronic degenerative diseases leading to a prospect of healthy aging and improved quality of life. An intersectoral multidisciplinary approach is used. DH's Central Health Education Unit (CHEU) provides a rich collection of audio-visual aids which consists of pamphlets, leaflets, videos, VCD, CDROMS, telephone hotline, homepage and exhibition boards to facilitate health educational activities. It trains an annual 200 Woman Health Ambassadors using the train-the-trainer approach to enable them to make healthy choices for themselves and others.

Positive parenting

8. Within a family, the mother often takes up the predominant parenting role, which requires specific knowledge, skills and competencies.

Increasingly, the MCHCs are incorporating elements of parenting education to increase the childcarer's competence and confidence in raising children. The programme aims to increase parental competence in managing common childhood behavioural problems and developmental issues, reduce parents' use of coercive and punitive methods of disciplining children, and improving parents' communication about parenting issues. In the long run, parenting satisfaction increases and stress reduces. Families with more complex psychological and social problems are referred to clinical psychologists and social workers for further management.

(B) To enable early detection of health problems for prompt intervention, DH implements the following disease prevention programmes -

Cervical cancer screening

9. At present, cervical screening is, in most cases, provided in MCHCs, WHCs, social hygiene clinics and EHCs as part of their mainstream programmes. To enhance coverage of the screening service, plans are underway to develop a territory-wide screening programme.

Mental wellness

10. Women who have recently undergone the challenge of childbirth need care and support to adapt to the demands of motherhood. Pregnant women and their family members receive health information on postnatal mood disorders when they visit the MCHC. Throughout the antenatal and postnatal periods, women with risk factors receive special attention and support. Those exhibiting features of postnatal depression or other mental conditions are counseled and referred for specialist care, as appropriate.

Pregnancy and childbirth

11. Expectant mothers receive free physical examination, routine blood tests, health advice and counseling at antenatal sessions run in the MCHCs. Prospective parents attend health talks and workshops to better prepare themselves for effective child caring. Clients with low obstetric risk are cared for in the MCHCs at scheduled intervals while those with higher risk are managed at obstetric units of the Hospital Authority under a shared care programme. After childbirth, nursing mothers return for postnatal check and contraceptive advice. Emergency obstetric care is provided at three maternity homes located in Tai O, Peng Chau and Lamma.

Universal antenatal HIV² screening

12. Starting from September 2001, all clients attending MCHCs are offered the HIV test as part of routine antenatal blood testing without additional charge. Pregnant women can choose to receive the test or not. A multidisciplinary team of professionals will care for screen-positive mothers. This will enable them to make the best decision and preparations for their pregnancy and subsequent care. The programme aims to reduce mother-to-child transmission of HIV infection.

(C) *Individuals who suffer from medical conditions may receive accessible, affordable and appropriate curative services which also carry elements of health promotion, disease prevention and community re-integration. Examples are -*

Healthy aging

13. Our elderly population, especially the old-old, consists of a large proportion of women. Considerable numbers of carers of elderly people are female and some of them are senior citizens too. The Elderly Health Services provide health assessment, counseling, education and curative care. By increasing health awareness of and providing skills to women on major health issues, women play an active part in enhancing their own health as well as that of their family members'.

Social hygiene service

14. The Social Hygiene Service provides counseling, education, prevention, investigation and treatment for individuals having or suspected of having sexually transmitted infection (STI). Special efforts are made to control and monitor the spread of STI among commercial sex workers who are at increased risk of spreading the infection. Free service, contact tracing, stepped-up sexual health education, screening for related medical problems and a team approach are features of this Service.

NEW INITIATIVES

Enhancement of women health service

15. The WHC enhanced its service in January 2000 by removing the lower age limit for service (upper limit remains at age 65), enriching the scope and content of health education programmes, revising clinical protocols and guidelines, and intensifying publicity efforts. A range of health promotion,

² Human immunodeficiency virus

disease prevention and screening services is provided and is well received. DH plans to extend women health service from WHCs to MCHCs in phases so that more clients will be served. Five MCHCs will be providing women health service by end 2001.

Parent education

16. An interdepartmental Steering Committee on Parent Education chaired by the Director of Education is looking into ways to support parent education and to encourage parents to participate actively in educational affairs for their children. It is expected that a locally effective and culturally sensitive package for educating parents in childcare will be developed for use across sectors. Significant improvements in parent-child relationship and communication, disciplinary methods, coping strategies and general health practices will be derived from the collaborative effort.

Universal cervical screening

17. With respect to the establishment of the universal screening programme for cervical cancer, a working group will be set up in 2001 to discuss issues related to uniformity of the screening protocol, maintenance of the screening registry, operational logistics and application of quality assurance measures. Enhanced public-private collaboration will enable successful implementation of the programme.

ADVICE SOUGHT

18. Members are invited to :-
- (a) note the existing health services provided by the Department of Health for women; and
 - (b) give comments on existing services and new initiatives relating to women's health.

Department of Health
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