The Dental Knowledge and Attitudes of Medical Practitioners and Caregivers of Pre-school Children in Macau

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Abstract

The dental knowledge and attitudes of medical practitioners and caregivers of pre-school children in Macau were investigated. The caregivers of 353 children (2.8 ± 0.6 years) from seven nursery centers completed a questionnaire and their children's had their teeth examined. Thirty medical practitioners completed the same questionnaire prior to a dental health seminar. The dental knowledge and attitudes of the medical practitioners were found to be better than those of the caregivers. Topics, such as, "acid can cause caries"; "fluoridated water can prevent caries" and "primary teeth play a role in the development of the permanent teeth" were significantly associated with caries in the caregivers' children (p<0.05). It is hypothesised that the medical practitioners had not conveyed their dental knowledge to the caregivers early enough so as to prevent the occurrence of caries in their children.

Key words

Dental attitude; Dental knowledge; Early childhood caries; Medical practitioner; Macau SAR

Introduction

Macau, which like Hong Kong, is located on the southeastern coast of China had a population of 454,000 in the year 2001 of which 98% were Chinese while the remainder were mainly of Portuguese origin. Currently, 28,000 of the children are under five years of age.

Although the public water supply in Macau is not fluoridated, fluoride containing toothpastes are widely available.

Most children who are prone to caries are also Streptococcus Mutans positive, whereas some children who are mutans positive do not have dental caries; suggesting that factors beyond the mere presence of bacteria cause dental caries. Cultural norms; psychosocial status and health behaviour are believed to be important factors contributing to the caries risk of pre-school children.

Approximately 200 medical practitioners work in public medical service centres providing infant health care and vaccination programs. These family doctors are the first health care professionals to be consulted by parents about the health of their infants.

Inadequate guidance regarding weaning and fluoride supplementation by health professionals are other risk factors of early childhood caries (ECC). However, the dentist is not always in a favourable position to prevent ECC because of not having the opportunity to make contact with the child in early infancy. Therefore, this important role may be played by pediatricians who can refer children to a dentist, for oral health counselling, preferably soon after birth, but no later than 12 months of age.

Sadly, among the 913 members of the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) who were surveyed recently, only 46.6% practiced the AAPD policy of performing the first oral evaluation at 12 months or younger. This suggests that even some oral health professionals do not appreciate the real value of early dental evaluations. Nevertheless, medical practitioners should be expected to have a sound knowledge and positive attitude towards oral health in order to provide accurate information.