

## **Alert on herbal medicine poisoning**

The Department of Health (DH) has recently received notification of a case of strychnos alkaloids poisoning from the Hospital Authority (HA). According to the information gathered, the affected patient, without consulting a Chinese medicine practitioner (CMP), purchased Chinese herbal medicines (Chm) including Semen Strychni from the internet, based on a self-known herbal formula, and then self-processed the Chm for consumption. The patient developed symptoms of limb and jaw tightness, as well as dysphagia after consumption of the Chm. The patient was admitted to a public hospital for treatment and was subsequently discharged. Laboratory results from HA revealed that both the urine sample of the patient and the sample of herbs contained strychnos alkaloids (strychnine and brucine). In addition, the dosage of Semen Strychni taken by the patient exceeded the dosage for clinical use. It was suspected that this poisoning case was related to consumption of Chm without following the instruction from a CMP, overdose of Semen Strychni and improper preparation of Chm.

Unprocessed Semen Strychni is a Chm in Schedule 1 of the Chinese Medicine Ordinance (Cap. 549) while processed Semen Strychni is a Chm in Schedule 2 of Cap. 549. Semen Strychni is commonly used for relief of pain and swelling and it mainly contains toxic alkaloids including strychnine and brucine. Improper use could lead to headache, dizziness, agitation, shortness of breath and muscle spasm, and convulsion. In severe cases, affected patient may have asphyxiation, heart failure, or even death.

DH reminds members of the public to consult a CMP before taking Chinese medicines, and to follow their instructions on preparation and consumption. One should not self-prescribe Chinese medicines, nor be credulous about formulae told by others. Members of the public should also purchase Chinese medicines from licensed Chm retailers to minimise the risk of acquiring herbal medicines that may be improperly processed. Medical advice should be sought as soon as possible if there is any discomfort after consumption.

Members of the public may visit the website of Chinese Medicine Regulatory Office of DH ([https://www.cmro.gov.hk/html/eng/useful\\_information/public\\_health/index.html](https://www.cmro.gov.hk/html/eng/useful_information/public_health/index.html)) for more information about safe use of Chinese medicines.

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