

**A study to look into the risk and protective factors for drug
related deaths in Hong Kong**

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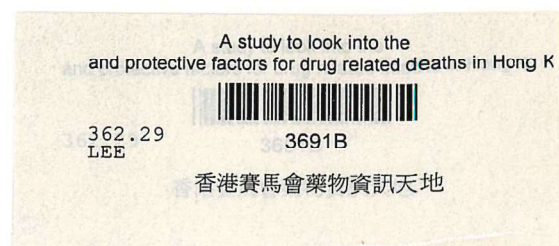
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"The study of drug abuse deaths, while not a topic we approach with eagerness, is an essential contribution to epidemiology, for these deaths are the ultimate sequelae of the drug dependence syndrome. The death of a young person dependent on drugs is often the first warning to a community that it has a drug problem; and because so many of the deaths occur among otherwise physically normal young adults, they truly are tragedies. The deaths can be a barometer, albeit not a perfect one, of the extent and seriousness of drug abuse"

William Pollin, 1979



1 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This project examined the factors that are conducive to the rising trend of drug related death in Hong Kong.
- 1.2. The literature research indicates that drug related death is over-represented among (1) young male chronic heroin abusers who inject their drugs intravenously, (2) drug abusers who are recently discharged from voluntary inpatient treatment centres or prisons, (3) drug abusers who combine intravenous heroin injection with benzodiazepines and alcohol, and (4) drug abusers who have comorbid psychiatric disturbance.
- 1.3. This project combines quantitative and qualitative methodology. It comprises analysis of longitudinal data, case series study, focus group interview and mini-ethnography.
- 1.4. Both quantitative and qualitative data confirm the risk factors reported in the international literature are applicable to the local context. Majority of drug related death in Hong Kong occurred among male abusers who inject heroin. About 30% of death occurred within a few months of discharge from treatment centres or prisons. Finally, the study found that alcohol abuse is not uncommon among heroin abusers, particularly among those recently discharged from treatment centres.
- 1.5. The qualitative data reveal that in early 1990s the quality of black market benzodiazepines deteriorated dramatically. Instead of coming from western pharmaceutical companies, almost all illicit benzodiazepines come from China and, more importantly, are often of unknown or fluctuating dosage.
- 1.6. Over the same time span also witnessed increased prevalence of multi-drug injection among heroin abusers, as well as increased occurrence of psychiatric complications among

heroin abusers. Taken together, all of these factors are conducive to a rising incidence of drug related death since early 1990s.

- 1.7. In view of the findings, we suggest that treatment centres and prisons should routinely educate drug abusers the risk of accidental overdose associated with lapses or relapses. Drug abusers should also be taught the danger of poly-drug injections, including the combination of alcohol and heroin injection. Apart from harm reduction, actions should also be taken to reduce the availability of benzodiazepines in the local black market. Finally, more researches are needed to understand what causes the increased prevalence of psychiatric disturbance among heroin abusers, and what can be done to reduce their drug related death.