Children’s oral health remains of concern

By DTI

HONG KONG: Over the past 50 years, dental public health measures and policies have been implemented by the government in Hong Kong to help improve the oral health of the population and children in particular. A historical analysis has now shown that these efforts have led to a general improvement in the oral health of schoolchildren. However, dental disease is still prevalent among children, especially preschoolers, in the country.

In order to provide a historical and epidemiological overview of the oral health of Hong Kong children, dental researchers at the University of Hong Kong reviewed all available oral health epidemiological data and information from published literature before 2014 through electronic database searches, supplemented with information obtained from government-archived oral health reports. In the past two decades, no substantial changes in the caries status among preschool children have been observed. The caries incidence in preschool children remains similar, with a reported prevalence of 35 to 51 per cent, they stated.

In 1979, the School Dental Care Service was introduced to provide prevention and dental treatment and oral health education to primary schoolchildren in Hong Kong. The programme contributed to raising awareness of oral health among schoolchildren and overcoming many social barriers to dental care access. Education changed children’s lifestyles and improved their self-care practices and use of fluoride oral health care products, which have become increasingly available in the country.

Despite these favourable results, the dental caries experience has remained unchanged for school children, the researchers highlighted. This might mainly be due to the fact that preschool children in Hong Kong are not routinely eligible for the school-based dental care programme.

In 1961, water fluoridation was implemented in Hong Kong and remarkably reduced the prevalence of dental caries. The researchers found that caries experience and severity among schoolchildren and adolescents decreased significantly, from more than 90 per cent in the 1960s to approximately 50 per cent in the 1980s and 1990s and to less than 25 per cent currently. However, in recent years, the prevalence and severity of enamel defects among Hong Kong children was observed, but there has recently been a slight increase.

The researchers concluded that new policies have to be drafted on dental care protocols to ensure evidence-based standards of care and to promote regular access to dental care and preventative services, especially to improve the oral health of preschool children in HK.

The review article, titled “Oral health of Hong Kong children: A historical and epidemiological perspective”, was published in the August issue of the Hong Kong Medical Journal.