

Hong Kong College of Paediatricians
Response to Report on the Development of Risk Assessment Tools for
Spouse Battering and Child Abuse in Hong Kong Chinese Families
Legislative Council Panel on Welfare Services
Subcommittee on Strategy and Measures to Tackle Family Violence
Meeting on 28th June 2007

The Social Welfare Department is to be congratulated for commissioning research on child abuse and spouse battering, both the Part One: Study on Child Abuse and Spouse Battering: Report on findings of Household Surveys and now Part Two: the Report on the Development of Risk Assessment Tools for Spouse Battering and Child Abuse in Hong Kong Chinese Families and releasing the results of both pieces of work. Part One affirms that child abuse and spouse battering cases presenting to professionals are few and far between compared with their occurrences in the community. With Part Two, we now have an assessment tool validated amongst Hong Kong Chinese families.

While the development of the Risk Assessment tools was thoroughly researched and field-tested, the authors alerted us that the tools are useful for triage only when used with appropriate training, audit of assessments and support.

The authors recognized well the limitations of such tools. Perpetrators who are willing to co-operate with the assessment are already motivated to a certain extent. Those who are unwilling to participate, or even meet the social worker / counsellor may be of a higher risk. Engaging them, for example, when they request help to locate their spouse may be a means of capturing their co-operation, as suggested by the authors, but it may also be an incentive to portray themselves in a better but not necessarily the true light. Reassuring stressed interviewees that the interview is “primarily to collect statistical information” is not strictly the purpose of the assessment.

The tools require time and experience in their use. Statistical probabilities are probabilities. Over-reliance on risk assessment tools can be dangerous. For families that lie outside these probabilities, their problems are no less real. Hence the authors cautioned that multiple sources of information should be used. Although prevention and detection of crime can be an exemption to the Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance, the different interpretation of such an exemption often hampers the sharing of information between professionals and needs to be addressed. The time required for collateral contacts can be substantial and often not recognized. Besides child physical

maltreatment being defined as severe or very severe levels of physical assault is arbitrary. A child, being hit with an implement or being shaken, would not be pleased to have the assault being considered minor. As stressed by the authors, the final decision on the line of action should be based on both the results of using the risk assessment tools and professional judgment with support from supervisors and second opinions when in doubt and perhaps erring on the side of over-protection with client safety being the prime concern.

Professional judgment is tied in with professional attitude, our tolerance of any degree of violence towards children both physical and psychological. The current imbalance of recognized cases of child abuse and spouse abuse in Hong Kong (806 vs 4424 in 2006) when overseas it is more in the vicinity of 70% of families with spouse abuse also having child abuse, testifies to our undue tolerance of child abuse and our reluctance to activate the protocol for child abuse management when the presenting concern is spouse battering. This can also be a problem when case workers, in the name of one case worker per family, have to cater to the interests of both adults and the children. The balance of conflicting interest is easier said than done. Perhaps the use of the Risk Assessment Tools can alert workers to the risk the children are facing in these families.

Assessors are reminded that family circumstances may change. Risk assessment is not an one-off event but it is unclear when the same client answers the same questions repeatedly, what will be the correlation with the actual risk.

The usefulness of the tools depends on the appropriate and timely intervention available. Only when the tools are in widespread use will we know how many families will be implicated in the various levels of risk. Staff who are overwhelmed with cases may attend to the obviously serious cases and willingly or unwillingly underplay the others.

The researches were commissioned in face of the rising recognition and incidence of child abuse and spouse battering. The Household Survey findings assist us in the better understanding of the problem in Hong Kong and The Risk Assessment Tools in the triage of cases to provide a suitable level of intervention but they are not in themselves solutions to our problems. Much still depends on the priority we place in according resources in the management of child abuse and spouse battering, or better still in their prevention. Attention is required in the areas of staff caseload, staff training, staff retention / turnover / morale, staff development and supervision, and

staff being required to be jack of all trades. Furthermore, when dealing with child maltreatment within the context of domestic violence we need seriously to consider not only physical injury to the child but the impact to the child chronically witnessing parental violence. The current report is therefore a step forward but only the beginning of many steps in addressing violence in our society.