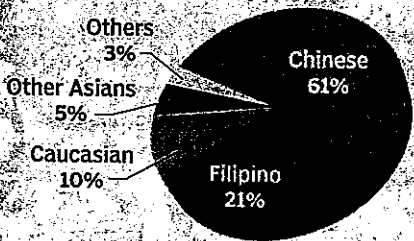


SUPERBUG DILEMMA

Screening call as cases rise among Filipinos



Community-associated MRSA



Among all cases:
18 percent are domestic helpers.

Among Filipinos:
74 percent are domestic workers,
remaining are students or housewives.

THE STANDARD GRAPHIC SOURCE: CENTRE FOR HEALTH PROTECTION

EXCLUSIVE

Patsy Moy

Filipinos in Hong Kong run a far greater risk of being infected by a superbug than do local Chinese, but health authorities are reluctant to order mandatory screening because they fear being accused of discrimination.

Centre for Health Protection figures obtained by *The Standard* show that local Filipinos -- there are 126,000 -- are 23 times more likely than local Chinese to be infected by the much-feared *methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus*, which is commonly referred to as MRSA.

Staphylococcus aureus is a bacteria usually found on skin and in mucus. It can set off problems ranging from skin and wound infections, food poisoning and urinary tract problems to potentially fatal conditions such as pneumonia and infection of the blood stream.

Health experts are concerned about the high percentage of Filipinos with the infection in Hong Kong as the vast majority work as domestic helpers.

They point out the infection is rare among Indonesian domestic helpers, who number only about 3,000 less than their Filipino counterparts.

The center's experts fear the disease could be getting carried here from the Philippines, but authorities in Manila cannot supply data for MRSA rates.

Hong Kong University microbiologist Ho Pak-leung said the center had not seen the superbug in Indonesian maids a year ago, lending weight to the idea the bacteria is carried from the Philippines.

"We are aware that Singapore, which has also hired a lot of Filipino domestic helpers, faces the same problem," he said.

Adding to the complicated patterns of MRSA is the fact Caucasians are even more likely to be infected with the bacteria.

The center recorded a total of 173 cases of community-associated MRSA in 2007 -- the year it became a notifiable disease. Cases jumped 58 percent to 274 last year.

According to the center, 21 percent of community-associated MRSA infections in Hong Kong hit Filipinos, 61 percent Chinese, 10 percent Caucasians and 5 percent other Asians.

Attack rates are 1.3 for every 100,000 Chinese compared with 30 per 100,000 Filipinos and 38 in 100,000 Caucasians.

Most strains of *staphylococcus aureus* can be treated with antibiotics. But MRSA is resistant to the powerful anti-

biotic methicillin as well as other commonly used antibiotics such as penicillin and cephalosporin.

Ho said the death rate of MRSA is 1 percent, but studies show it may soar to 40 percent if it clashes with an influenza outbreak. "For the concerns of public health, we -- as microbiologists and doctors -- would like the government to take prompt action to curb the spread of MRSA before the situation in Hong Kong reaches that of the United States," he said.

MRSA is widespread in the United States with 4.5 million carriers and an attack rate of 100 per 100,000 people a year. "Sensitive issues such as racial discrimination is beyond our expertise and it should be tackled by the government," Ho added.

"Maybe it would be fair to require all foreign workers to be screened for MRSA before they come to Hong Kong, regardless of their nationality."

Most Filipino domestic helpers infected with MRSA are admitted to Queen Mary Hospital and Pamela Youde Nethersole Eastern Hospital.

A standard health check for domestic helpers currently covers hepatitis B, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS and costs about HK\$750. A laboratory test for MRSA is about HK\$300.
patsy.moy@singtaonews.com