

Fast results with S'pore-developed HFMD kit

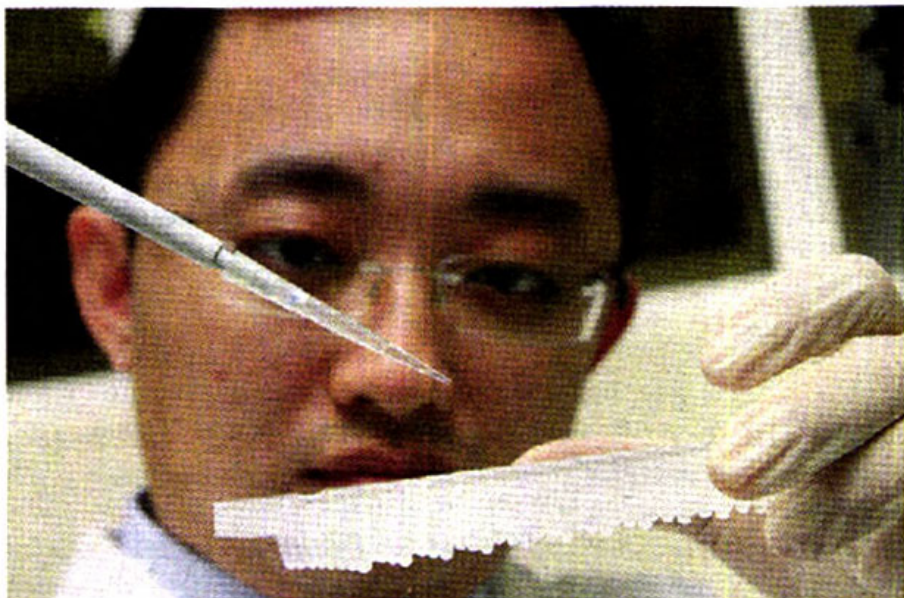
SINGAPORE — It currently takes about six hours to diagnose a patient with Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease (HFMD) and a further six hours for its more virulent strain, Enterovirus 71 (EV71).

But the world's first HFMD kit, developed by Singapore Polytechnic lecturer Dr Tan Eng Lee, promises to do so in two hours.

"With accurate diagnosis, children can be more effectively isolated, hence reducing the chance of spread," said senior consultant Quak Seng Hock of the University Children's Medical Institute at the National University Hospital.

However, the kit works only when patients develop symptoms, about four days after contracting an HFMD virus. By this time, transmission to others may have already occurred, said Dr Thoon Koh Cheng, consultant and head of infectious disease services at KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

In any case, HFMD is already easily diagnosed in clinics, said doctors whom MediaCorp spoke to. Symptoms such as high fever and red spots are obvious, according to Dr Clarence Yeo of Killiney Family and Wellness Clinic and other general practitioners.



Dr Tan Eng Lee, took two months to devise the HFMD detection kit, which can identify the illness and the more fatal EV71 virus in two hours PHOTO COURTESY SINGAPORE POLYTECHNIC

Only a small fraction of patients need to be referred to hospitals either to confirm the disease or because of serious conditions.

Hospitals will be the first to get the kit, around August next year.

Some parents welcomed the kit's usefulness in identifying potentially fatal HFMD strains, such as EV71.

"Such a kit will be useful in more serious conditions ... but they should also be made readily available in places such as childcare centres, where outbreaks occur

most frequently," said Ms Josephine Choo, 44, whose daughter contracted HFMD two weeks ago.

It would be useful, though, if there was "a kit that could be used in a GP setting, which allows the results to be made known to patients almost immediately", said Dr Leslie Tay of Karri Family Clinic.

This is a possibility that Dr Tan is exploring.

Last week, there were 509 HFMD cases, down from 732 in the first week of October, according to the Health Ministry. NG JING YNG