Preventing Herpes Zoster in Patients with Chronic Disease & Immunocompromised Condition – Are We Doing Enough?

Biography

Professor Kai-Hang YIU is a Clinical Professor of Medicine at The University of Hong Kong, specializing in cardiology with qualifications including MB BS (HK), MD (HK), MRCP (UK), FRCP (Edin, Glasg, Lond), FHKCP, and FHKAM (Medicine). He earned his medical degrees from the University of Hong Kong, advancing from Clinical Assistant to Clinical Professor since 2022, and obtained a PhD from Leiden University in 2016 on cardiac imaging. Professor Yiu has published over 230 peer-reviewed articles, with a significant focus on high-impact research in cardiology, and was a pioneer in Asia for performing transcatheter aortic valvular implantation (TAVI).

His research emphasizes advanced cardiovascular imaging and big data analytics, identifying subclinical abnormalities to enhance patient management. He leads major studies on valvular, diabetic, and rheumatology heart diseases in China, securing over 25 million HKD in competitive grants. Clinically, he specializes in interventional cardiology and advanced imaging, directing HKUSZ hospital's cardiology service and the Cardiac and Vascular centre, achieving notable awards for excellence in healthcare and clinical service.

Abstract

Preventing Herpes Zoster (HZ), commonly known as shingles, in patients with chronic diseases and those who are immunocompromised is a critical issue in public health. Individuals with chronic conditions such as diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and various cardiovascular diseases, as well as those undergoing immunosuppressive treatments, are at a heightened risk of developing HZ. This is due to their compromised immune systems, which can struggle to contain the reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus (VZV), the causative agent of both chickenpox and HZ. In Hong Kong, 97% of adults over the age of 39 has had chickenpox, and are thus at risk of HZ.

HZ is a significant detractor of the quality of life in patients with chronic conditions or immunocompromising conditions, with post-herpetic neuralgia and other complications including stroke, Ramsay-Hunt syndrome, and depression being common long-term conditions that affect the patients' lives long after HZ.

Despite recent advances in preventative care for HZ, there remains a gap in the widespread adoption and implementation of HZ vaccination recommendations, particularly among those with chronic diseases and the immunocompromised. Barriers such as vaccine availability, awareness, and concerns about vaccine safety and efficacy can hinder vaccination rates. Moreover, the direct and indirect impacts of HZ, including significant morbidity, decreased quality of life, and increased healthcare costs, underscore the importance of vaccination as a preventative measure.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from healthcare providers, policymakers, and the public health community to increase awareness and uptake of the Recombinant Zoster Vaccine (RZV). Tailored strategies to educate patients and healthcare professionals about the benefits and safety of vaccination, coupled with initiatives to improve access to the vaccine, are essential in mitigating the burden of HZ in these high-risk groups.

There is still work to be done to ensure that patients with chronic diseases and those who are immunocompromised receive the protection they need. As healthcare professionals, it is our responsibility to advocate for and implement evidence-based strategies to reduce the impact of HZ in these vulnerable populations.