The saga of the “chicken-killer” virus reached its climax recently with the much-publicised slaughter of more than a million chickens, ducks and geese. But few people know about the team of experts who worked quietly behind the scenes to protect the public’s health. These unsung heroes are the international influenza experts at the University of Hong Kong, who uncovered the killer virus’ genetic fingerprint and its potential threat to humans. Their discovery prompted the Hong Kong government’s decisive action to prevent the spread of the virus to people.

HKU’s influenza research team is led by Dr Kevin Shortridge, (PhD, London University) a world-renowned microbiologist. Working with him are two senior research officers, Dr Malik Perris (PhD, Oxford University) and Dr Guan Yi (PhD, The University of Hong Kong), and 10 local research assistants. Established after the H5N1 virus outbreak of 1997, the team works closely with the Hong Kong government to identify new influenza viruses and stop them before they can infect humans. The contingent’s backers include not only HKU and the Hong Kong government, but also the World Health Organization, the US National Institute of Health and other international health bodies.

With the emergence of a new H5N1 strain this year, the HKU scientists and the Hong Kong government have been trying their best to prevent a pandemic. A key question is how the virus’ goose gene segment surfaced in Hong Kong chickens - through a local reassortment, or the import of an infected mainland chicken. The answer is critical because it would show where the gene segment originated and whether additional action is necessary.

So far, the researchers have been unable to identify the mode of transmission. There is no evidence that the virus reassorted locally, particularly from the mixing of chickens, geese and ducks, because of Hong Kong’s policy of segregating these birds. Dr Leslie Sims, Assistant Director of the Hong Kong Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, says chickens, geese and ducks are separated at all stages of production. The ducks and geese are slaughtered centrally.

The virus could also have originated from the 500,000 chickens that Hong Kong imports from the mainland every week. However, routine tests of these birds have shown no signs of the new strain, nor have there been any reports of chicken deaths in the mainland.

Researchers are puzzled. “It would not be easy for us to point to a single source,” says Mrs L Yam, Secretary for the Environment and Food. HKU’s Guan believes there is a high probability that the goose virus came into Hong Kong from China because farming conditions there are ideal for influenza mixing. Mainland farmers tend to breed together many animals, such as chickens, ducks, pigs and fish in ponds fed with pig manure. That creates a veritable reservoir for influenza mixing.

The emergence of the new H5N1 virus is not all bad news. Because of the early detection, says Shortridge, research can be done on the gene sequence in an incipient stage. That will give scientists a head start in blunting the virus’ impact. Says Shortridge: “We may be able to get a molecular fingerprint of the virus, allowing us to detect new influenza strains before they become infectious.”

For now, the danger seems to have dimmed that the new H5N1 virus may become a pandemic. But the threat of influenza pandemics has not been eliminated. Shortridge states that a high density of ducks means concentrated reservoirs of influenza that can create the “molecular” momentum for human influenza reassortment.

The next move is to decide what is needed to prevent further outbreaks of the H5N1 virus in Hong Kong. One idea is to establish a centralised market for the slaughter of chickens to prevent any kind of mixing with other animals. Both Shortridge and Guan believe that would be the best step for preventing influenza infection. However, such a move is sure to meet opposition from local chicken sellers, whose livelihoods would be jeopardised.

Regardless of the measures taken to prevent future outbreaks, it seems clear that tireless research and decisive action combined to prevent a potentially devastating flu outbreak. The University of Hong Kong’s influenza research team came through at the critical moment. By doing so, the scientists helped protect our international city’s most precious asset - its people.
Chairs Exhibition

“A work of art is always simultaneously a technical achievement.”

– Walter Gropious

A cardboard chair is a simple manifestation of this statement.

The Chairs exhibition was held on June 11, 2001 at K K Leung Building, featuring over 20 cardboard paper Chairs designed and produced by Year-One Architecture students. Over 100 students, staff and guests joined the officiating guests, Ms Joyshan Lam, Managing Director, Hong Kong Economic Journal, Ms Ada Wong, Member, Culture and Heritage Commission, Vice-Chancellor Professor Ian Davies, Professor R Frewer, Head of the Department of Architecture and Dr T Kvan, Dean, Faculty of Architecture on a rainy day to open the exhibition with a champagne reception.

While Ms Joyshan Lam shared her poem on Chairs, Ms Ada Wong contrasted how her loved one died while taking a nap in an armchair with another kind of chair, which was to be used for execution of US prisoner, Timothy McVeigh in the evening on the same day. She concluded her speech by appealing to the future designers of chairs, “to come up with new designs of chairs, in particular chairs for the classroom and the office, so that we can all be masters of our own chairs.”

The ceremony was happily ended by a lucky draw. The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Davies, drew the lucky winner who could pick any Chair to bring home as a gift.

web.hku.hk/~hku90/chairs.htm

Ms Joyshan Lam sharing her poem of “Chairs” (see below).

Ms Ada Wong sitting safely and comfortably on one of the paper chairs.

Cherish your chair

Do not judge me by my fleshless arms,
They will cradle your body, like a nest.
Do not judge me by my shapeless legs,
They will steady you and give you rest.

I know I’m just a piece of furniture,
Not as sexy as phallic architecture.
But my spirit is built on the pillars of the forest,
And my bones are carved with the love of an artist.

Look on me as your comfort and your anchor,
Somewhere to go when you are sad or tired.
Regard me as your slave and your lover,
Someone you can sit on, any way you desire.

I am sturdy and reliable, yet not so square as a table.
Why not sit up with all the angels and the strife,
When all can be well between women and chairs?

Share with me, my throne, my life,
And forget all the cruelty in human affairs.
Why did Virginia Woolf need a Chair of her own?
Why was Forster lucky? Because a chair came with his room?
Why did Gertrude Stein write, A chair is a chair is a chair?
And why was Tennyson so worried, about a chair,
idle chair?

Women love so hesitatingly,
Because love eternal stays so fleetingly.
With me you need not have a care,
For a one-night stand is physically impossible for a chair.

So love me then, don’t be a prude,
Answer my plea, your own vow declare!
There’s no need to pity me for being a chair,
For as Oscar Wilde prophetically understood,
There’s only one thing in the world worse than
not being a chair.
And that is NOT being a chair.

中醫藥國際研討會

大中醫藥學院於四月間，在香港中醫藥學院國際研討會，作為廿一世紀的中醫藥發展帶來新的景象。

是次研討會邀請了各界人士到場主講及參與，包括政府官員、中醫藥產業界及教育界等人士，參加者近三百人，是中醫藥界的一大盛事。

這次研討會令香港中醫藥學得到肯定，並介紹了港大中醫藥學院最新的研究成果。
New Medical Complex and Hong Kong Jockey Club Clinical Research Centre

The New Medical Complex and the Hong Kong Jockey Club Clinical Research Centre were topped out on May 2, 2001.

The New Medical Complex at No. 21, Sassoon Road (former site of the Northcote College of Education) provides a gross floor area of 48,250 square metre to accommodate the relocated pre-clinical school and the Medical Library (from their existing venue on Sassoon Road) as well as the first Hong Kong Jockey Club Clinical Research Centre. In addition, there are conference facilities with state-of-the-art design and features; Medical Education Unit with tutorial rooms; Alumni Floor and multi-disciplinary laboratories.

This building project is a major estate development of the University as well as the Faculty of Medicine, with a projected budget of HK$1,568 million and a construction period of four years. The University Grants Committee has allocated HK$1,128 million to fund the relocation of the pre-clinical complex while The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust has donated HK$270 million for the construction of the 7,200 square metre Clinical Research Centre.

New Halls

Due to the demand for student accommodation, the Lady Ho Tung Hall went through redevelopment in 1998. The Hall was famous as the backdrop for the filming of “City of Glass”, a movie made by the film director and Hotungnian Mabel Cheung Yuen-ting (BA 1973). Two new student hostels have been built on the Pokfulam site: Lady Ho Tung Hall (400 places for female students) and Starr Hall (500 places, co-educational). There is also a multi-purpose hall named Ho Tim Hall. The new halls, collectively known as the Jockey Club Student Village, will be completed and ready for the first batch of students for the new academic year in September.
New Council Chairman

The University is pleased to announce that the Chancellor has appointed Dr Victor K K Fung (馮國經博士) as the next Chairman of the Council (校務委員會), with effect on September 1, 2001.

Dr Fung who has been a member of Council of the University of Hong Kong since 1997 and since 1996 an honorary professor in the University’s School of Business, is Chairman of the Airport Authority of Hong Kong and is a past Chairman of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council.

In September 1985, Dr the Hon T L Yang (楊鐵樑博士) was appointed Chairman of the Council of the University. His term of appointment formally ended last year, but Dr Yang graciously agreed to continue as Chairman for a further 12 months to assist the University at what was then a difficult time. “Dr Yang’s Council Chairmanship over the last 16 years has seen the University in the charge of 4 different Vice-Chancellors and its evolution into a comprehensive, research-led university of international stature,” said Vice-Chancellor Professor Ian Davies.

Employment Situation of HKU Graduates

HKU Careers Education and Placement Centre conducted the annual employment survey in late November 2000. Among the 2,748 graduates of year 2000, 94% of them responded to the survey. The result was released recently.

It found that the average salary of HKU graduates of the year 2000 is HK$15,448 per month, making these graduates probably the highest income-earners among counterparts of local institutions. If those studying medicine and nursing are excluded, the salary is HK$13,349, representing an increase of 7.6% over that of the Class of 1999.

“Commerce and Industry” remains the largest employment sector for new graduates, accounting for 66% of the cohort, followed by Community, Social & Personal Services (20%), Education (9.4%) and the Civil Service (4.8%).