

## ***Laribacter hongkongensis* - A Novel Bacterium that Causes Gastroenteritis is Associated with Freshwater Fish**

In 2001, the Centre of Infection, the University of Hong Kong (HKU) described a new bacterium found in the blood of a cirrhotic patient with community-acquired infection resulting in abscess formation in the pleural space. The bacterium was found to be a novel genus and species not previously described. The Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Medicine, HKU had the honour to name this new bacterium as *Laribacter hongkongensis* (*L. hongkongensis*), Lari for its seagull appearance under the microscope; and hongkongensis, in honour of Hong Kong, the place where it was first discovered, and the place where the researchers were born, educated and lived.

Since the announcement of this encouraging discovery, researchers have found *L. hongkongensis* in faecal specimens of a number of patients with gastroenteritis, some cases in Hong Kong and some cases in Switzerland. This indicates that the new bacterium may have spread to other parts of the world.

In 2004, the Microbiology team has found that the new bacterium is associated with community-acquired gastroenteritis and traveller's diarrhoea. It is discovered that *L. hongkongensis* is present in 25% of freshwater fish and 15% of minced freshwater fish meat. In 80% of the patient cases the diarrhoea was watery and in the other 20% the diarrhoea was bloody. The number of bowel motions per day of the most serious patient case was 30 times while the duration of diarrhoea of the most serious case was 90 days. Besides, in the 17 patients of the current study, 59% had a recent history of travel; 94% have eaten fish within 3 days prior to onset of diarrhoea and 29% had taken minced freshwater meat within 3 days prior to onset of diarrhoea.

In reality, other bacteria, such as *Vibrio cholerae* and *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, that also cause diarrhoea are commonly found in fish. The most effective preventive method is to cook the fish and minced freshwater fish meat thoroughly before eating. In addition, raw meat and cooked meat should not be placed together in order to prevent cross contamination.