

亡羊補牢

wang2 yang2 bu3 lao2

There was an outbreak (爆發) of mold infection (霉菌感染) at the Queen Mary Hospital. A few patients were infected and two of them died.

The Hospital Authority traced the infection to unclean linen, and suspended use of the contractor (承辦商) that was responsible for cleaning the linen.

Bedding in Queen Mary's high-risk wards as well as linen at many other medical facilities served by the same contractor were replaced.

A task force was also formed to investigate the incident.

This series of actions taken by the authorities can be described by the Chinese idiom “亡羊補牢” (wang2 yang2 bu3 lao2).

“亡” (wang2) is die, “羊” (yang2) is sheep, “補” (bu3) means mend and “牢” (lao2) is fold, sty or pen. Literally, the idiom “亡羊補牢” is “die sheep mend fold,” “to mend the sheepfold after losing the sheep.”

Idiom by Lon Yan

It means it is not too late to take precautions to prevent something bad from happening again. So “亡羊補牢” is often followed by the phrase “未為晚也” (wei4 wei4 wan3 ye3), meaning “it is not too late.”

The English expression “closing the stable (馬) door after the horse has bolted (逃走)” also uses farm and animal as an analogy, but it has a rather different meaning. It means you are trying to solve a problem when it is already too late.

“Don't lock the stable door after the horse has been stolen” is advice against taking precautions after the damage is done. If you only have one horse in the stable, then closing the door after you have lost it surely doesn't help.

Terms containing the character “補” (bu3) include:

填補 (tian2 bu3) - fill a vacancy, fill a gap

補藥 (bu3 yao4) - tonic

補助 (bu3 zhu4) - subsidy

滋補 (zi1 bu3) - take nourishments; nourishing