A Glimpse of Public Health in China

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This supplement issue, sponsored by Wuhan University, focuses on challenges facing public health in China. China has achieved much in the development of its health system and the provision of health care to its citizens since the 1970s, despite its very large population and vast land area. One of the key principles of public health is equity, where every citizen has equal access to healthcare services and interventions.¹ Undoubtedly, accessibility to health care services varies considerably between geographic regions in China, particularly in the rural areas, and narrowing the gaps in health outcomes and mortality rates between the top and bottom quartiles remains a challenge. The article by Yang et al² in this issue highlights the burden of health care costs among urban elderly in China and concludes that the health care demands of many elderly have not been met due to deficiencies in general outpatient coverage in the basic medical insurance scheme. The study by Cao et al³ found that hospitalization costs among type 2 diabetes patients had increased substantially between 2005 and 2012 and that patients in Urban Employee Basic Medical Insurance had higher costs than those in the New Rural Cooperative Medical Scheme. They concluded that medical insurance for chronic illnesses needs further improvement. Zhang et al⁴ have documented the high level of direct economic burden imposed on patients with chronic hepatitis B relative to their household income. China has a comprehensive program of vaccination against hepatitis B and potentially in the future these costs will begin to decline.

In common with all countries, China faces challenges in financing the health care of the poorest in its society. Public health in all countries, including China, is facing challenges from global events that it has little control over. For example, the outbreaks of Ebola, SARS, and HIV, to name but a few infections, have shown that they have no respect for national borders and that global collaboration and control programs offer the best prospects for prevention. China, along with many other countries, is facing health challenges related to rapid urbanization, demographic changes, and international migration. Lifestyle-related diseases, including noncommunicable chronic diseases, and injuries are increasing in many countries, including China and will have an impact on health care systems. Public health programs that emphasize on prevention and improving health literacy have an important role to play in controlling these modern epidemics. For China, continued implementation of public health programs and the strengthening of primary health care services, particularly in rural areas, will improve the health of their population.

In 2009, the Central Government of China strengthened the provision of public health services via its Healthcare Reform Plan,⁵ but more remains to be done. In this issue, the article by Zhang et al⁶ highlights the challenges of providing basic public health services in rural villages in China. Public health policies, although developed, need to be further enforced in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in China.

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