

# Mental Health

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## Mental health care in China: a time of transition

Progress is being made in China on the adoption of a community-based approach to preserving mental health and caring for the mentally ill.

In China the mental health service has great difficulty in meeting the increasing requirements of the population in both urban and rural areas. Industrialization and urbanization are bringing profound changes in society which have an impact on health, especially mental health, and consequently there is a need to modernize the service. The transition from a traditional model, focused on the management of major psychoses, to a broader one concerned in particular with psychosocial questions is not easy. Not least among the problems requiring attention is that of changing public attitudes to mental disorder.

A series of national seminars and workshops has been organized to promote the development of mental health services. The subjects covered have included the treatment of minor mental disorders in general hospitals, the psychosocial aspects of primary

health care, mental health in children and old people, and the teaching of psychiatry. The main areas in which progress is being achieved are outlined below.

### **The National Collaborating Committee for Mental Health**

Experience of psychiatric practice over the past 30 years has shown that close cooperation is essential between the various administrative bodies concerned with the development of the mental health service. This is particularly important for the establishment of community mental health care, the rehabilitation of patients and the carrying out of preventive intervention. Furthermore, psychosocial research and intervention are often multidisciplinary in nature, thus requiring collaboration between different departments. A preparatory meeting on the setting up of a National Collaborating Committee for Mental Health was held in Beijing in July 1985. Participating were representatives of the

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Ministries of Public Health, Public Security, Civil Affairs, Justice, and Labour and Personnel, and of the Committee of Education of the State Council. A national

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mental health programme was drafted at this meeting. The establishment of the National Collaborating Committee for Mental Health will be followed by the formation of similar bodies at lower levels.

### **The Chinese Mental Health Association**

In order to confront mental health problems satisfactorily, a joint effort is necessary by educationalists, sociologists, psychologists and other professionals. A multidisciplinary organization—the Chinese Mental Health Association—was formed in 1985 and has been involved in the training of community mental health workers, the dissemination of information on mental health among lay people, and the organization of multi-disciplinary academic exchange and research activities. Publication of a new bimonthly journal, the *Chinese mental health journal*, was started by the Association in 1987.

### **Psychological counselling in general hospitals**

A pilot study was conducted at Beijing Medical University on psychological counselling for women before they underwent tubal ligation. It was found that

50% of controls complained of moderate to severe worry or anxiety before the operation and that 19.4% suffered psychosomatic sequelae. Women who received psychological counselling before the operation were less anxious or worried and suffered significantly less from psychosomatic sequelae.

The disease pattern in China has changed markedly in recent decades. Data collected during 1983 showed that cerebrovascular disease had become the main cause of death in Beijing and Tianjin and the second most important one in Shanghai and other big cities, whereas infectious and parasitic diseases had predominated in earlier years. An epidemiological study in 12 districts during 1982 revealed that the prevalence rate of mental disorder associated with cerebrovascular disease was the third highest and was followed by schizophrenia and mental retardation. Clearly, psychological counselling in general hospitals is extremely important in psychosomatic medicine.

### **Children's mental health and adolescent behaviour**

Family and population structures in China have undergone great changes in response to socioeconomic development and the policy of encouraging each couple to have only one child. The traditional way of rearing children has been affected, especially in urban areas where it is usual for both parents to go out to work.

Studies are in progress on the effects on children of the way in which they are brought up. Although there is much debate about the psychological development and behaviour of single children, no evidence of untoward effects has yet emerged from several controlled studies. Indeed,

behavioural problems have been found to be more closely related to educational level, the professions of the parents, the degree of family harmony, the expectations of the parents, and the time they spend with their children.

An investigation on behavioural problems in 2432 schoolchildren in Beijing indicated that they were sex-related: a much higher rate of antisocial behaviour was detected in boys than in girls, whereas neurotic behaviour was much commoner in girls. However, the frequencies of these problems were predominantly influenced by the family and social milieu. The prevalence of behavioural problems in children was highest among those with only a male parent (28.0%), followed by those whose families had no interest in their welfare (25.0%), those whose parents had no expectations of them (22.7%), those with only a female parent (21.7%), those with divorced parents (17.7%), and those whose parents had an unharmonious relationship (17.5%). Considerably lower prevalences of behavioural problems occurred among children from families in which harmony existed (7.7%), children of professional people or people of a high educational level (6.3%), and children of families in which the mother dedicated herself totally to the family (4.4%).

Another study has disclosed a relationship between delinquency in teenagers and their family milieu. Almost half of the 72 delinquent boys studied had been stealing, 30.6% had been fighting, and 20.8% had been involved in unlawful sexual activity. Among 50 delinquent girls, the most common misdemeanour had been unlawful sexual behaviour (70%), while 24% had been stealing. Juvenile delinquency seemed to occur relatively often among children whose parents were manual workers or had a low educational level, and

was certainly associated with broken families, family disharmony, and families with a history of criminal acts or mental disorders.

### Mental health in the elderly

Life expectancy has increased from 35 years before the foundation of the People's Republic of China to nearly 68 years today. The population is thus aging and, for example, it is predicted that by the year 2000 some 15% of the people in Beijing will be at least 60 years old. In order to maintain the Chinese tradition of respect and care for old people a national committee for the elderly has been set up with a view to promoting research into problems of aging as well as encouraging the whole community to become involved in this matter.

Meanwhile, some special organizations for old people have been set up: they include the University of the Elderly, the National Sports Association for the Elderly, and the Institute of Geriatrics. Furthermore, special medical facilities now exist for old persons. The country's Constitution states that adult sons or daughters are obliged to take care of

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their parents. Nevertheless, the increasing number of old people will create various new problems, including some relating to the mental health of the elderly.

Some studies have been made in recent years on the general condition and mental

health of old people in China. For instance, in 1984 the Department of Social Medicine at Beijing Medical University conducted a survey of 417 people aged 60 and over in a village in Shunyi County. In this rural agricultural community the elderly were virtually all cared for in the traditional way, i.e., by their descendants; none went into old people's homes and almost all lived with members of their families. Two-thirds of the old people were still taking care of their grandchildren and they were generally very satisfied with their lives. The principal diseases of the elderly were chronic bronchitis, stroke and hypertension. Of ten severely disabled people who were unable to communicate orally six were stroke victims, one had senile dementia, one had Parkinson's disease and two were deaf.

At about the same time, the Institute of Mental Health conducted a survey of 1070 people aged 60 and over in an urban area: 47.2% of them lived in extended families and 20.5% lived alone or away from their children. All but 5% of the men received a pension or wages and free medical services, while 38% of the women earned wages, 40% received free medical

services, and 30% had access to subsidized medical care. A majority of the elderly retained some influence over decision-making within their families. Only 39% took care of their grandchildren. Mental health was generally good, except for 2% suffering from a continuous feeling of loneliness and 11% who felt lonely some of the time; 5% complained of worrying most of the time and 30% worried occasionally. Feelings of uselessness or boredom were experienced by only 2.9% and 2.4% respectively of these old people.

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Mental health care in China is in a state of transition from a hospital psychiatric service to community-based care. As development proceeds, the demand for more and better care is growing. Much remains to be done in the training of mental health professionals. There is a need for a service that can be integrated into the primary care system and cover a wide range of mental health problems. A multidisciplinary approach to research is essential and there should be close collaboration between administrative departments and other bodies concerned with the treatment of mental disorders. □

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## *African population — unprecedented growth*

*Africa's current population growth rate is frustrating the continent's efforts at social and economic development and poses a threat to the health and well-being of the African people. With an average growth rate of 3% a year—unprecedented in history—the population of Africa south of the Sahara will increase from 470 million at present to 700 million by the year 2000, says a new World Bank study, Population growth and policies in sub-Saharan Africa.*

— Leo O. Omolo. *Development forum*, XIV (9)  
November-December 1986, p. 1.