

CHINA:

health care serves the People



Several years of working in hospitals as a nurse-aide, EKG technician and as a licensed practical nurse have made me more and more aware of the injustices of a society that is motivated by making profits rather than by what people need. This is glaringly evident in the American health care system where if you are rich, or have good health insurance, every effort will be made to save your life. But if you are poor, well you know the story. Long clinic waits; finding out that certain hospitals won't take Medicaid for payment ("go to City" they say). Arrogant doctors who never explain anything. If you do get into a medical center (like Barnes) it is because you have "an interesting disease" and all kinds of tests and operations can be done which won't help to cure you but are only being done to train medical students.

The situation for those of us who work in hospitals is bad and continuously getting worse. First of all, we are poor. The best paying hospitals in St. Louis start their aides and housekeepers at around \$2.25/hr. At many places it is less than \$2.00/hr. Secondly, hospital workers are becoming increasingly overworked as hospitals cut back staff "to save money". Patients are paying more and getting less now because the nurses and aides are too busy and often too tired to do a really good job.

Most hospital workers and many health care consumers are aware of this situation and we wonder how we can change it. Doctors and hospital administrators are always quick to deny that health services can be given any other way and most of us have never seen any other kind of system.

I just recently read a book about health care in China called Away with all Pests by Dr. Joshua Horn who is an English surgeon who spent 15 years living in China and working in hospitals and clinics all over the country. The contrasts between the U.S. and China, a communist country, are extreme. In China, goods and what kind of health services people need rather than what makes money or what people can afford to pay for determines what goes on. I thought that writing about it for On the Line would give us something to think about.

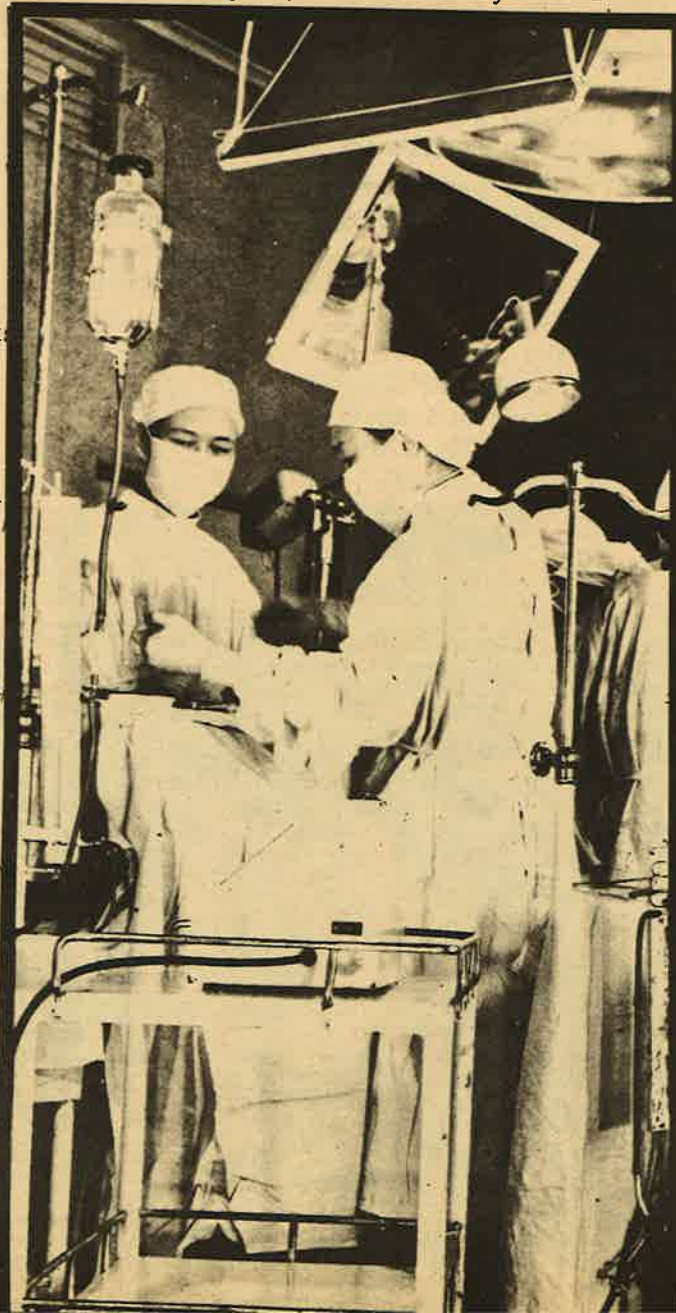
The main emphasis in health care in China is on preventing disease and educating people about their health.

People are taught about nutrition and sanitation and how communicable diseases are spread. In areas where a particular disease is widespread, medical workers go from village to village and house to house explaining what measures should be taken to prevent the disease and to find and treat hidden cases of it.

In 1949 when the Communists won the Revolution in China, China was a very poor country where most people had never seen a doctor. The Chinese government decided to begin a system where everyone in the country (not just those in the large cities) would receive the best care available at that time. Since there were hardly any trained doctors in China in the early 1950's what the Chinese government did was this. They tried to train a "peasant doctor" for every village in all of China. These peasant doctors would train in the clinics and hospitals in the larger towns until they knew about as much as a practical nurse does in the U.S. Then they would go back to their villages and treat the common ailments that came up day-to-day. Each peasant doctor had a phone in his house or dispensary that goes to the clinic in town. Often this is the only phone in the village. In any emergency or serious medical situation, the doctors come to the village to treat the person even if they have to walk many miles into areas that have no roads.

HOSPITALS IN CHINA

The way a Chinese hospital operates is also very different. First of all everyone who works in the hospital is considered equal, whether they are a



doctor or a nurse or an orderly or a kitchen helper. This works two ways. One way is that one day a week, doctors and hospital administrators (people who would be considered big-shots and bosses here) have to do manual labor at the hospital. They have to help the nurses aides and the housekeepers and the laundry workers, etc. This way they never belittle the difficulty of these jobs nor can they forget how important the people who do these jobs are to the functioning of the hospital. I don't think anyone has ever seen an American doctor collect trash or empty a bed pan.



The other way that this equality works is that all the people who work one ward meet together. Everyone who takes care of the patient is considered important in deciding what type of treatments he should get. In the U.S., nurses and aides take care of the patients and sometimes maybe it is even the housekeeper who has gotten to know the patient best, but it's the doctor who makes all the decisions even though he doesn't see the patient for more than 5 minutes a day. In China, all these people who care for the patient are involved in the treatment. When a course of treatment is decided on, it is fully explained so everyone understands what is happening and why.

In China many doctors are women and it is possible for a nurse to become a doctor using what she has learned from her nursing experience. In the U.S. a nurse would have to go back to school for 8 years to become a doctor.

In Chinese medicine, a doctor's attitude towards the patients and his fellow workers is as important as his medical skill. Meetings are held to discuss such things as a doctor being arrogant or nurses acting like they don't care. Criticisms are given with an emphasis on how people can improve. Even the patients in the ward meet and evaluate their care and make their suggestions to the hospital personnel.

The final difference in a Chinese hospital is that all patients get the best care there is available whether they are ordinary factory workers or Chairman Mao himself. Money or prestige does not enter into who gets care and who doesn't.

It certainly is something to think about the next time you are standing in line at a clinic or you call the doctor at 1:00 a.m. because the baby has a fever of 104° and he says "I don't make house calls".