

Hospital Management in China in a Layman's Eyes

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Editorial

I wanted to write something about the differences in hospital management in China for a long time. I was born and grew up in China and was used to the systems there. I moved to the US almost thirty years ago and have been staying here ever since. When one of my close relatives enrolled in a prominent hospital in China recently, I started to feel the huge differences between the hospital management in China and the US. I am not working in the hospital, so I can only write what I observed as an outsider or a customer.

The first difference is in the nurses. Their job responsibility, work ethics, attitudes, etc. are very different. Let me start with nurses in China. I barely went to any hospitals when I grew up. My family members were active and in good health, and I didn't even have an Intravenous (IV) injection back then. My only hospital experience before I came to the US was to visit an obstetrics department in one of the prominent hospitals in our province. One of my friends was a medical school intern there and she invited me and another female friend to watch baby delivery. It was early February and still very cold, we were all excited and dressed like medical students, and entered the delivery room. It was a large room with a few beds in the middle. There was one woman who would give birth to her firstborn, and she was lying there quietly, occasionally moaning in pain. Inside the delivery room, there were four or five nurses, they were chatting, reading novels, knitting, etc., but none of them paid any attention to the woman who was soon in labor. They simply ignored her and behaved like she didn't exist, one of the nurses even asked the woman in labor to be quiet. In those days, no relatives (not even the husband) were allowed to enter the delivery room, so we were the only ones there to comfort this poor woman with some nice words. That was the situation in the early 1990s.

Comparatively, the nurses in the US hospitals were kind and treated everyone with respect. I was hospitalized twice in the US, once for salmonellosis (Salmonella infection), and once for giving birth to my children. In my limited days of stay in the hospital, all the nurses were nice, and no one ignored me when I asked a question. I also have friends who are nurses in the US. They are usually very responsible and respect patients and all people. Fast forward

to today, one of my close relatives is hospitalized in China, and I visited her a few weeks last year. The nurses now seem more polite and treat people nicely. However, it is not clear what their responsibility on the job is. For example, they don't provide any personal care or help to the patients, such as bathing, feeding, or changing diapers when necessary. They only need to write down some medical records or change IV bags. It seems like an easy job. There are nursing schools in China, but I don't know what their curriculum looks like. The patient's family must hire a personal caregiver and pay her separately in the hospital. Usually, there is a company in each hospital that provides this kind of personal caregiver service, and this company and the hospital are separate entities. The personal caregivers are called "hu-gong" in Chinese, a suitable English name for them would be a care worker. They usually are middle-aged women, without much education, and mostly come from the countryside. They usually do most of a nurse's job, such as feeding the patients, changing diapers, bathing them if necessary, also running errands for the patients. They usually get paid 24 hours per day, and they stay in the patient's hospital room with a folding bed. It seems to me that hospitals in China split the nurse's job into two parts: the nurse only does some paperwork, and the real care is done by the less educated care worker. There were some horrible stories about the care workers abusing patients when their relatives were absent, but I haven't encountered these kinds of things, and hopefully, I will not.

The second difference is in the doctors. It is difficult for me to compare the doctor's quality as both systems have some good doctors, although a doctor's degree seems easier to obtain in China, and tuition for a medical doctor is much more affordable in China. According to a recent survey, there are about 4.43 million licensed doctors in China [1], and most doctors in China are paid much less compared to the US. They are seeing more patients due to the large population. A consequence of this busy schedule is that many doctors have bad attitudes towards patients. Some doctors show impatient or bad tempers with others around them, including patients, and sometimes they may not even listen carefully to patients' needs. For example, a simple question may incur an unfriendly remark from the doctor and some doctors would say that you are interfering with the treatment. I was kind of shocked at this attitude. One recent experience was that my close relative had acute pancreatitis in January and her doctor applied octreotide acetate (sandostatin) IV injection immediately for five days per week which lasted two weeks [2]. This drug is an inhibitor of insulin and is also used in treating glucagonoma; it can cause many side effects [3], such as severe stomach pain with nausea and vomiting, and long-term use of this drug could cause gallstones. In the whole process, the doctor in this prominent Chinese medicine hospital didn't do a complete check-up, except a CT scan to show that there was an inflation of the gallbladder. The doctor didn't communicate with the patient's family about the treatment at all. When I called and wanted to know more details about the treatment, I got a very rude response saying that I was interfering with her treatment. The most frustrating thing is, after almost 4 months, my close relative is still lying in the hospital, with a biliary catheter (and a bag) on her side to treat her cholecystitis. I didn't know when the doctors changed the diagnosis from acute pancreatitis to cholecystitis. I called the hospital many times and they refused to answer the phone. Even today, the doctors don't know what caused the problem. The only reason that they used a biliary catheter is that once the catheter was removed, my relative would have a high fever. My close relative lost a lot of weight and suffered from malnutrition. She was very skinny before, so losing weight is not a good thing for her. And the doctors in this major hospital said that this catheter may have to stay on my relative's side forever. I was speechless and very frustrated. As a relative of the patient, I think it is very normal to

ask questions related to different choices of treatments. The block of communication causes lots of unnecessary conflicts or strife between doctors and patients. Comparatively, doctors in the US are working in a less stressful situation, they get paid much higher, are respected, and usually see fewer patients each day. It is very rare to hear a fight between a doctor and a patient. I also noticed that doctors in China who had training experience in the US are much more friendly and easy to talk with, they treat patients with proper respect. In general, the overall quality of doctors is not as good as in the US.

The third major difference is the hospital payment system. In China, you must pay cash first before any doctors can see you and treat your disease. And if you don't have enough money, the hospital can refuse any service immediately. However, if you are a teacher or working in the government, including those retired from these places, you usually will get a full or 90% refund from your workplace. If you are working in the private sector such as a company, you probably pay most portions out of your pocket, even if you have medical insurance. This may cause many social problems, for example, many lower-income people in China cannot afford to go to the hospital and see a doctor when they get sick; while in the US, all people can go to the hospital and see a doctor first and get a bill later. This management also causes other problems such as corruption in the hospital system. For example, if you are a retired person and can get a full refund, the doctors may over-treat you with all kinds of unnecessary drugs. In their mind, since the patients will get a refund anyway, they can use more expensive sometimes unnecessary drugs. The doctors also have pressure from the hospital administration to bring in profit, which means, bringing more income from treating patients. On the other hand, the patient can abuse the system also. For example, in the US, hospital beds are limited, and most patients are outpatients. In China, hospital beds are also very limited. But, since some patients can get a full refund for their hospital stay, especially for old patients, provided they can pay for the stay ahead of time, they can stay there for a long time. While in the nursing home in China, there is no refund at all to stay there. A possible remedy from the government side could be to allow old patients to stay in nursing homes and get reimbursement at the same percentage as their hospital stay, and hopefully, that will free more hospital beds in China.

In summary, the healthcare systems in China are very different from that in the US. There are some improvements these days, but there is still a long way to go.

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