



The 'Magic Pen' and Fading Public Trust in Doctors in China

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Perspective

In March 30 2016, National Health and Family Planning Commission of China advocated a notification to protect medical staffs [1]. Is it enough to prevent medical crisis? A few days ago, a doctor in China encounter a medical crisis using 'magic pen', the ink from which disappears just hours after hitting the paper [2].

This dangerous incident illustrates one of the biggest challenges of doing medicine in China: patients or their relatives often show a distrustful and downright hostile attitude to doctors [3,4]. This has led to several incidents in which clinicians were assaulted or even killed by patients or relatives who were dissatisfied with clinical outcomes. Such a situation is reminiscent of Aesop's story of the farmer and viper: even when doctors give their best efforts to treat patients, they may still be sued later by dissatisfied patients or relatives, who sometimes have misinformed or entirely unrealistic expectations about how much or how quickly patients should recover from their illness.

This is a pathetic situation because both sides lose: doctors can't focus on healing, which may affect their performance and their attitude, potentially increasing (or prolonging) patient suffering. In any event, it is unclear whether increased communication would reduce aggression against medical staff. Strong enforcement of existing laws against physical attacks and creation of new laws to criminalize psychological attacks may be much more effective at dissuading angry patients and their relatives. A blacklist system may also be helpful, so that patients know that their treatment of medical staff can have long-term consequences. At the same time, doctors have their own part to play in addressing the lack of public trust: they must be careful to explain carefully all treatment options and justify why they recommend one option over another. One reason Chinese society has advanced so much in prosperity and development is its constant pursuit of a harmonious society. Yet a harmonious environment is far from prevalent in hospital and clinics around the country. Both the givers and receivers of medical care need to recognize their rights and duties toward the other side and treat the other side, above all, with respect. We need to work towards a system in which doctors can go about the business of healing without fear or distraction, while patients and their relatives can focus on recovery without suspicion and animosity. We owe as much to one another and to ourselves, since we will all find ourselves in a doctor's care at one time or another.

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Received Date: 11 Nov 2016

Accepted Date: 02 Dec 2016

Published Date: 31 Dec 2016

Citation:

Zhong J-H, Tan J-T, Yang T, Peng N-F. The 'Magic Pen' and Fading Public Trust in Doctors in China. *Clin Oncol.* 2016; 1: 1174.

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