



Nursing Homes in China: Now and the Future

Birong Dong and Shiying Wu

Abstract: China is facing growing challenges from the increasing elderly population, the number of elderly who require care is growing, “4-2-1” family structure and “empty nesters” exacerbate the burden of care. The existing nursing homes are far from meeting the demand. However, two extremes exist: overcrowding and low occupancy because of cost, facilities and services. There is a severe shortage and instability for caregiver. The majority of caregivers have the low education, they receive little training in elder care. No matter how difficult it is reform is essential and urgent, The next 25 years will be key for Chinese government preparing to deal with China's aging society, and that strategies must be developed to improve laws and regulations for care elderly, and encourage private and foreign investors to participate in the nursing home business. Establishing a complete set of laws and regulations, exploring the most appropriate care model, improving care service, professional training and recruiting volunteers are challenges to China in future.

Keywords: care for elderly; nursing home in China

Department of Geriatrics, West China Hospital, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

Address correspondence to Birong Dong, Department of Geriatrics, West China Hospital, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610041, China. E-mail: birongdong@163.com

1. Unprecedented population aging and dilemma in China

China is running into the aging society, the speed and extent of aging beyond imagination. By the end of 2009, the number of people over 60 years old exceeded 167 million, accounting for 12.5 percent of the total population. By 2020, that number will increase to 248 million, taking up 17 percent of the country's population.¹ China's octogenarian elderly population is more than 18.06 million, the rate of growth is 5.4%, this means that there will be an increase of 500 000 people over age 80 every year.

China is facing these dilemmas: the rapid aging of population, uncovered elderly by social security systems, the gradual reduction of labor force and the rapid increased need of care for the elderly with chronic disease and disability. There is also an accelerated migration from rural to urban for young people thus, increasing the number of the empty nest elderly. There are also growing demands for upgraded welfare facilities and the care services lagging behind the development.

2 . The heavy burden of long-term care in China

Recently, an online survey by www.people.com.cn showed that care of the elderly ranked first, for the first time, among the issues raised by citizens.² The size of the working-age population is shrinking. The elderly-support ratio- the working-age adult (ages 15 to 64) per number of elderly (age 65 and above) is projected to decline drastically from 9 persons to 2.5 persons by 2050.³

Traditional Chinese culture has great respect for elders, and for a long time, the elderly were taken care of by younger family members. However, the informal care system is getting weaker because of the one-child policy that is leading to a '4-2-1' family structure, for every one couple, there are four or more older family members who may eventually need to be cared for. In the future, fewer children will be available to care for their ageing parents.

The massive migration of young people from domestic to foreign countries or from rural to urban is leading to a rise of "empty nesters". China has at least 23.4 million "empty nesters" and the number is growing, it is estimated it will reach 90 percent by 2012,⁴ and this situation is more serious in rural areas.

Several large-scale national surveys show that more than 32.50 million elderly people need different forms of care services, and more than 5.8 percent of the urban elderly said they are willing to live in nursing homes. But, there are 39 and 546 nursing homes in urban and rural areas of China respectively in 2006, with a total 1.497 million beds, which is about 0.84% of the total elderly population, much lower than 5% of international level. Therefore, there is a huge gap in the market of nursing homes and institutions.

3. The status of nursing home in China

Forms of the nursing home: The nursing home in China is mainly divided into three types: the government-run social welfare institution and apartments for the elderly (managed by provincial, municipal and district government), the collective-run nursing home in rural townships and lastly private nursing home, with the first two mainly accept the elderly with no children and no other means of support.

Occupancy rate and influence factors Our survey of 10 nursing homes (out of 110) suggests that the size of nursing home in Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan province) varies from 20 to 300 beds, 58.7% elderly in nursing home are over 80 years old, the occupancy rate of government-run and collective-run nursing home are 92.7%, while that of private nursing home is range from 30% to 70%. At a government-run nursing home in Guangzhou (in south of China), the 1,100 beds are almost fully occupied and more than 100 people are on a wait list to get in, with inquiries coming in every day. The main factors influencing the elderly to select nursing home are cost (50%), quality of care (24%), living conditions (18%) and the distance from home (8%). The private nursing home has a low occupy rate for two very different reasons; because of excessive luxury and high cost or inadequate condition due to a lack of funds and policies. Table 1 shows the basic demographic information for the elderly in nursing homes in Chengdu.

Table1 basic information for the elderly in nursing homes of Chengdu

Characteristics	Number(n)	proportion (%)	Characteristics	Number(n)	proportion (%)
Gender			Occupation		
Male	140	39.0	Workers	144	40.4
Female	216	61.0	Farmers	75	21.1
Age(years)			Residents	110	30.9
60~69	27	7.6	Other	27	7.6
70~79	120	33.7	Chronic Disease		
80~89	184	51.7	Yes	316	88.8
≥90	25	7.0	No	40	11.2
Marital Status			Self rated health:		
In marriage	74	20.8	Health	53	14.9
Widow	247	69.4	Okey	188	52.9
Divorce	6	1.7	Poor	115	32.3
Unmarried	29	8.1	Cognitive impairment		
Education level			Male	47	26.0
Illiteracy	97	27.2	Female	134	74.0
Primary	121	34.0	ADL impairment		
middle school	59	16.6	Impairment	68	19.0
High school	56	15.7	Normal	298	81.0
College	23	6.5	Cost(RMB)		
Pension			200-500	28	7.9
Yes	243	68.3	500-800	127	35.6
No	113	31.7	≥800	201	56.5
			Health Exam per year		
			Yes	166	46.6
			No	190	53.4

Provision of services The service provision varies from urban to rural areas and from developed to undeveloped area. In ten nursing homes of our survey, five refuse to accept elderly with dementia , three refuse to take those who are completely dependent. The cost varies by types and levels of care in each nursing home, charged from 500RMB (\$73) to 2,240RMB (\$328) per month in Chengdu of southwest China. The basic service provides personal care, room cleaning, meals, laundry, and basic medical care. The activities mainly include watching TV, playing mahjong and chess, the variety of programs depending on the health and interests of the elderly was not unavailable. The facility is old and poor. The quality standard for care, including standard setting, assessment, and monitoring is still inadequate, with 90% nursing homes in China do not provided rehabilitation therapy and volunteer service.

Severe shortage and instability of caregiver Facing more than 18 million Chinese over 80 and 169 million people who are over 60, there are only 20,000 qualified elderly caretakers, there is a urgent need of 10 million professionals.⁵ The teams of care staff have a high mobility because of low income, long working hours and insufficient knowledge. The majority of caregivers in nursing home were formerly farmers (58.1%), laid-off workers or retired workers (38.7%), 60 caregivers from 10 institutions in our study show that illiteracy is 19.4%, primary school is 56.5% and junior middle school is 22.6%. Most care staff receives little training in elder care.

4 . Future development strategies in China

The rise in the aging population has pushed China to work at building a comprehensive and efficient national social security system to support the elderly in both urban and rural areas. To provide basic care for this disadvantaged group, the government has given monthly old allowance to the elderly over 80 years old and further promotes the nursing allowance system across the nation.

China's development of elderly care will undoubtedly be based upon in-home care. In addition to the overwhelming percentage of elderly who prefer to be in their own home rather than a nursing home, the government has already begun to dedicate its attention and resources to developing this industry, and encourage private and foreign investors to participate in the nursing home business.

No matter how difficult it is reform is essential and urgent. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has made plans to promote daycare centers for the elderly in communities across the country and provide professional training programs to care staff.

In view of China's huge elderly population and inadequate financial resources, the developments of various forms of elderly services are upcoming trends, like as home-visit care, day care, and community-based care. The community services including hostels, emergency calls, hotlines, BP calls, bell for help, welfare houses, rehabilitation houses, nursing homes, day care center, and entertainment activity centers are being gradually popularized in different city of China.

5. Thoughts and Suggestions on expanding China's care service for elderly

(1) Chinese government should establish a complete set of laws and regulations on developing and improving care service for elderly and present a systematic and integrated policy system for management and operation of nursing home.

(2) The regulations and standard of nursing homes needs to be seriously planned and implemented, and an evidence-based evaluation system needs to be developed. Government should perform inspections regularly.

Professional training needs to be organized. The doctors and nurses working in nursing homes should be trained in general medicine, rehabilitation and community nursing respectively, focusing on elderly care. For medical students, general medicine, rehabilitation, and community care should be included in the core curriculum, and encourage younger doctors or nurses to work in nursing homes. For caregivers, training programs should improve caregiver's skills include the physical care and mental care should be given if needed, with their own interests protected.

(3) Volunteers must be recruited, oriented, and supervised to be used effectively in nursing homes. Establish and improve the management model and operation mechanism of voluntary services in nursing home, promote the participation consciousness of citizens and enhance citizens' acceptance of volunteers.

We believe that care services for elderly in China will develop at a high speed. By the year 2020, although, the family continues to provide the majority of care for the elderly and disabled, considering the importance of the traditional family in China and the presence of the '4-2-1' family structure, there will be a painful transition from predominantly family care to community care for the elderly. Fortunately, central and local governments have become aware of this imminent transition.

Reference

1. Liming Zeng. news.cntv.cn/china/20100207/100321.shtml (Accessed Feb 7, 2010)
2. Song Wei. Aging society needs better social insurance. <http://en.cncaprc.gov.cn>
(Accessed April 18, 2010)
3. United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision.
4. Yuanting Zhang and Franklin W. Goza. Who Will Care for the Elderly in China. Journal of Aging Studies. 2006; 20(2): 151-164
5. China Politics : Day care, elderly services to expand: welfare official.
<http://china.globaltimes.cn/chinanews/2010-03/511717.html> (Accessed March 12, 2010)