

Asia Rising - A Health Check for China

Matt Smith

Welcome to Asia Rising the podcast from La Trobe Asia where we discuss news, views and general happenings from Asian states and societies, I'm your host Matt Smith.

China is home to one and a half billion people, many living in heavily industrialised cities and with that comes a heavy burden of medical problems. The health system has a lot on its hands and today's guest is well aware of the challenges that China faces.

My guest is Martin Taylor, Team Leader for Health System Development and Collaborative Initiatives at the World Health Organisation based in Beijing, and he joins me today to provide China with a health check.

Martin Taylor

The World Health Organisation in China is very different in many ways to the World Health Organisation in many other countries where we have representative offices. Our role here in a country like China with strong human resource capacity and strong financial capacity in health care is a challenge for us to find our niche and our role, but I think we can boil it down to three or four key areas that we focus on.

The first as the global health advocate is advocating for attention to neglected public health issues or public health issues that we feel are not getting sufficient attention. So one of those for example in China at the moment is hepatitis treatment.

A second area that we work on is working with the government on complex and difficult policy challenges and the implementation of them, where there's no easy solution and where we can act as a bit of a bridge and bring in international expertise. By being an independent and international organisation we can act as a bit of a neutral place for exchanging ideas and solutions. One example of that at the moment is health care reform in China and the reform of the health care system which is complicated in any part of the world.

A third key area is as the kind of global advocate of public health part of our role is to engage the population on health issues. A classic example of that of work that we've done in recent years is on smoke free public places and combating tobacco use, and the work that our office did last year in supporting the Beijing government introduce a smoke free public place legislation and now working with the national authorities on that nationally.

The final area that we work on where we work quite closely with the health authorities, is on mobilising attention to health issues with people who lead in other sectors in government to have an impact on health. Urban Planning has such a huge impact on the health of the population and their ability to live a healthy lifestyle so we can work with the health authorities to mobilise what we're working on at the moment is health cities, so working with mayors at city level to make sure that health is addressed, not just in the health sector but more broadly across local government.

So those are the kinds of areas where we've identified that we can add some value and bring something to China because of our independent international role.

Matt Smith

How receptive have the Chinese health authorities been to an independent organisation?

M

On the whole they are very receptive. Not so much I would say because they see us as facilitating change, they are the leaders of the changes in their country, but they also see very clearly a role for an independent international voice on some of the issues and international experience.

Two years ago Premier Li Keqiang asked the World Bank and WHOR, our global heads of agencies, to prepare a report with some advice and suggestions for the government on health care reform. That doesn't mean that the government will follow every single bit of advice that we give, but they know that that advice is given from an international and credible perspective, and I think that is a huge value for the government.

Matt Smith

All countries face their own challenges when it comes to health, but given China's population it must be particularly challenging to deal with. What should it be prioritising do you think?

M

That's a very good question and of course the risk in that is the issues that I don't list become the ones that people pick up on. But the two issues that we frequently work on in this office are the growing burden on non-communicable diseases and health care reform to strengthen primary health care in the community closer to the population. A large amount of this office's work falls under those two headings.

The reason why we prioritise those? Firstly 80% of the avoidable disease burden in China comes from non-communicable diseases.

Matt Smith

Can you talk me through that concept just a little?

M

What we're talking about there is not an old style disease burden about people getting infections from each other, it is a disease burden from lifestyles so high levels of smoking, bad diet, insufficient exercise are particular ones. So for example in China more than 50% of adult males smoke; these cause huge disease burdens now and increasing for the future.

If you just look at the disease profile that's where the attention should be following the statistics. It's also a huge challenge for a country like China which has a health care system which is very based around hospitals and acute emergency care because the long term care of the chronic conditions that China is facing in the future is incredibly expensive in hospitals and it's not necessarily needs to be done in hospitals, in fact in many countries it is best managed; and it can be as safe and as high quality if it's managed from local community centres with emergency care when needed.

And so that kind of combination of those two issues, non-communicable diseases and the health care reform are huge priorities for us, because if the country is first of all going to treat and support the people in the future who have those long term chronic conditions, they need a stronger primary health care system. Also it would be unaffordable to try it in a hospital system so in terms of the long term sustainable financing of the health care system there needs to be a stronger primary health care.

And then finally of course, we don't need to just accept that this high non-communicable disease burden stays, we should be doing and we are doing what we can now, to reduce the burden for

the future so that people taking action now for their lifestyle so they can avoid that disease burden in the future.

Matt Smith

Can you give me some sort of idea where China falls in with, vaguely speaking the rest of the world? Is it one of the more challenging countries with more problems, is it one of the least challenging countries?

M

That's a very good question. In terms of the overall global statistics, the disease burden for non-communicable diseases is possibly slightly higher in China than some other countries, there is a challenge for China in terms of addressing it. For example if you compare with other OECD high income countries, they already have well established, highly financed health care systems adapting those systems may be a little bit easier than China which still increasing health expenditure still building a system. On the other hand that could actually be an opportunity for China because they may not get stuck with having to reform existing models, they can perhaps leapfrog and take advantage of new technologies to take health care away from health care setting sometimes. So there's a bit of both sides for China.

One of the other challenges that China faces in this is that within China there is such huge diversity and there are still parts of the country where a more old style infectious disease burden is still very high, and there are still many counties in the country where that are still designated as poverty counties.

Matt Smith

There must be such a big range of challenges across the whole country depending on the amount of urbanisation going on I suppose.

Can I ask you, the World Health Organisations perspective and your perspective on the recent changes to the One Child Policy? What do you think the effect of that will be on health in China and do you think it will have an impact on population pressures here?

M

It's a very good question and one which has a lot of research going on right now...

Matt Smith

No pressure...

M

... as you would expect. I mean first of all it's worth stating that a change in population policy that gives families, and in particular women, more control over their fertility is a good move, so that shift from relaxing from one to two is a good step. The main area that we have focused on in the World Health Organisation has been the preparedness of the healthcare system to deal with the extra and anticipated increase in births.

Since the early 1990's China made huge progress in reducing maternal mortality and they did that with some very targeted focused policies on encouraging women to deliver in hospital facilities where they could get the emergency care that they needed. China was one of the first and most successful countries in the world in terms of achieving the millennium development goal for maternal mortality. Now it would be a tragedy if that began to be threatened because the healthcare system is not ready. Now the government has actually recognised this of course and they have been doing their own planning and preparation and we've been providing a bit of

support on that to try to make sure there are sufficient facilities and staff to maintain the level of quality so that we don't see an increase in maternal mortality, and so that we don't see an increase in perinatal mortality as well because we don't want the babies being born to suffer.

So from a health perspective the government has been planning for a couple of years and putting in place steps and measures to try to make sure that doesn't happen and of course are monitoring quite closely at the moment because we are now seeing the first implications.

Matt Smith

I'd like to now change the topic to the air pollution in China which seems to be a focus in western media; I think is one way to put it. So I was wondering what is your take on the air quality in China is and in particular in Beijing?

M

Yes, and I can speak as a WHO staffer and as a local as well. First of all air pollution is a health hazard in terms of the short term health consequences, in particular in terms of respiratory infections and for long term exposure, cancers and cardiac problems. And I think we should recognise that the government here has recognised that and they have done a lot in terms of policies in the last few years to begin to clamp down on polluting industry, to look at shifting power stations and sources, traffic, a number of issues and that should be congratulated. Of course it may take some time for some of those to have a major effect and in the interim period people and cities need to do what they can to protect themselves when the air is bad.

People do worry about it, you only need to see on the days when the air quality is bad, the number of masks that are worn. It is a concern for people, I think for many people who lived their whole lives in this situation is probably a bit different to the transient population like myself and other internationals who are here for a number of years and know their exposure is limited and then depart.

In the time that I've been here now, in the last three years, I think I have seen improving air quality; more frequent days when the air quality is good and the monitoring data that comes from the monitoring stations and which we can all follow on our aps on our phones, that's set up. I also think it's an issue for which we'll have to make our own judgements and weigh up pros and cons.

For example I do a lot of running here in Beijing and some people would say it's crazy to run in Beijing. My view on that is that I don't run when the air is bad, I run when it's good and I get to run as regularly, pretty much as I would like to. Occasionally I have to miss a run but my view is that also the benefits of that outweigh the potential costs of a sedentary indoor lifestyle where you don't get the exercise and you don't get the mental health benefits of it.

So I think it is an issue of concern for people in Beijing and in other cities but it may seem alongside other issues that they are concerned about, perhaps not as high priority as for a western visitor who sees it for the first time perhaps.

Matt Smith

Can I turn lastly to research efforts that are going on in China and I believe and you can correct me on this, that part of what the World Health Organisation does is say 'you can help out the rest of the world by doing this, or this area of the world can use your help with this'. Can I ask what you think Chinas strengths are and what they've got to offer the world in their capacity to help?

M

There's no doubt that in China there are some really, truly, world class researchers and scientists.

In the kind of broader health area that we work in there are a number of ways in which that manifests itself. Some of it is basic research by scientists in labs, looking at diseases, developing new drugs and new medicines area.

Then we have the whole efforts that China makes to build its own health system and what can be learned from those as much from a policy and implementation. We're increasingly seeing China playing a role and exploring a role in its engagement with Africa, both in its how to side, but also medical products and medicines and this kind of taps into China's research and development. But also the manufacturing capacity here producing for the African market with some products that may be less attractive for established western pharmaceutical firms for example, to manufacture for Africa.

Another final area I should say when you're talking about China's research, development and expertise is of course increasingly the World Health Organisation has a whole range of global committees and advisory groups who advise on global guidelines with the best evidence and knowledge and of course there's a large number of Chinese scientists who sit on and contribute their research to those bodies at a global level.

There's a huge potential and it's a potential that China is already tapping into and acting on and in fact when our director general Margaret Chan visited Beijing back in July in this room, she held a meeting with some of China's leading researchers and scientists to discuss actually precisely how China has some value and comparative advantage and how they can get the most out of that for the benefit of global health.

The issue of antimicrobial resistance is a global problem, it is an issue where China could play a huge role. Basically anti-biotics and other antimicrobials or antivirals and others that what they are designed to combat is becoming increasingly resistant, and so we find that if they've become less and less effective and so we have to look to second and third line and sometimes more expensive and less effective drugs and antibiotics. It's a global challenge.

China just recently launched a new national action plan on antimicrobial resistance from 2016 to 2020. Which is a great step forward and a great move for China and also a good example for other countries to look at. That national action plan brought together a large number; I think it was 16 different government ministries and departments, not just health which is obviously one of the main ones and also agriculture which is a area where large amounts of antibiotics are used, sometimes unnecessarily, but it also brought in science and technology and research and development as well.

Because if we are to prepare for a future world where our healthcare systems can keep functioning with antibiotics and other antimicrobials, there's a double research and development challenge. One is to identify the future pipeline of antibiotics, so that we get new ones online as the current ones we have in the future go offline and are no longer effective. The second research and development challenge is to develop new diagnostic tools so that for example, if somebody needs antibiotics we can more quickly understand precisely which antibiotic rather than having to prescribe a wide range which then can result in greater resistance.

Those are two great challenges and China's research and development community has the potential to contribute to those globally. I think the Chinese government would like to see them doing that and from a World Health Organisation perspective we're encouraging researchers all around the world who have potential to focus on that. And of course tradition, the most commonly used drug to treat malaria came from a traditional Chinese medicine and is now used

as a combination therapy. The potential and the history is there from China, the question now and hopefully this new action plan will do it, will be to make sure the resources are available to release that potential.

Matt Smith

That's Martin Taylor, Team Leader for Health Systems Development and Collaborative Initiatives at the World Health Organisation based in Beijing.

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I'm Matt Smith and thanks for listening.