

# METRO

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## Elderly Chinese on extended visits here often go without adequate medical care



MARVIN FONG | THE PLAIN DEALER

Nurse Mei Liu checks the blood pressure of Xiao Lingli at the MetroHealth Asia Plaza Health Center near downtown Cleveland. A group of local Chinese doctors is reaching out to uninsured elderly Chinese residents who come here for extended stays.

### Group of Chinese doctors reaches out to give assistance

JUNE Q. WU  
*Plain Dealer Reporter*

Mao Zengda, 72, was alone on a Saturday morning when he suddenly doubled over in pain. When his daughter came home later that morning and saw his ashen face, she rushed him to the emergency room.

The problem? A kidney stone. The price for the trip to the ER was about \$1,000. That crisis passed, but the prospect of future medical emergencies gnaws at people like Mao, a native of Beijing, whose yearly stays

in the United States are long. He has no insurance when he is here, and he has not seen a doctor since that incident 10 years ago.

Mao has simply banked on continued good health and self-doctoring.

There are more than 6,000 people of Chinese descent living in Cuyahoga County, according to researchers at the Center for Urban Poverty and Community Development at Case Western Reserve University. Many, like Mao, are elderly parents who traditionally join their families in the United States and help raise

their grandchildren.

A former civil engineer in Beijing, Mao started coming to Ohio with his wife, Yang Shaobo, in 1996 to live with his daughter's family in Broadview Heights. They stay for roughly six months at a time.

If Mao becomes ill while visiting, he dips into his half-year supply of assorted medicines he brings from China. If self-medication fails, his plan has been to go home, where his health insurance there will cover the bulk of his medical expenses.

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#### Insurance discounts

If you have no health insurance and live in Cuyahoga County, you may be eligible for the MetroHealth Community Discount Program. To find out if you qualify, call 216-778-7878 to set up an appointment with a financial counselor. If you are Chinese and feel more comfortable speaking Mandarin, call 216-861-4646. Discounts are based on family size and income levels.

# CHINESE

FROM B1

## Doctors aid visitors on extended stays

But unforeseen complications like Mao's kidney stone episode do arise, especially in this aging population. Many forgo the regular check-ups that doctors recommend for chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure or diabetes.

The elderly said they don't want to further burden their children with medical expenses.

"Every time we come to America, we think carefully of where we might be hurting," Yang, 66, said in an interview conducted in Mandarin. Yang, who suffers from hypertension, high cholesterol and gallbladder polyps, said she errs on the safe side and usually brings a suitcase full of medicines for all imaginable problems.

"We mustn't get sick," she said.

Doctors said a self-administered combination of drugs and herb-based remedies poses potentially serious health concerns. ER physicians may not be able to determine how much of what medicine is in a patient's system, for example.

A group of Chinese doctors in Greater Cleveland witnessed this practice of self-doctoring for a

number of years and finally decided to do something about it. This month, they put on a health seminar to help visiting parents find free or discounted health care from local physicians who speak Mandarin or Cantonese.

The majority of visiting Chinese parents in the Cleveland area are not eligible for Medicare and do not purchase short-term insurance, said Dr. Xin Wei, an assistant pathology professor at CWRU's School of Medicine and an active member of the Greater Cleveland Chinese Medical Doctors Association.

"They think there's no one to help them, so they adjust dosage of their own drugs according to some manual or whatever they brought from China," Xin said. "Most don't know that health-care opportunities exist."

### Language barrier is a problem

Many visiting parents speak limited, if any, English. The thought of having to communicate their medical problems — even with the aid of hospital translator services — is so unsettling that many would rather wait to see their physicians in China.

"The language barrier will always be there," said Dr. Li Li, a medical school professor at CWRU who was part of the health seminar. "It's very hard to choose the right words to describe your symptoms, and there are cultural differences in expectations."

Li described the health-care system in China as treatment-oriented — you go to the doctor with the expectation of leaving with a prescription.

"I usually have to explain that here it's important for the physician to provide health services, not just give out prescriptions,"

he said.

Li's message was twofold when he addressed more than 100 at the seminar: Put away the suitcase of medicine from China and check out health-care opportunities provided by Chinese doctors here.

Doctors said the MetroHealth Community Discount Program provides eligible Cuyahoga residents with primary care at a reduced cost.

For those who wish to see a Chinese doctor, MetroHealth Asia Plaza Health Center has an eight-member staff fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese.

"What they need is basic-level primary care to make sure everything is fine," Xin said.

### Drug free, worry free

Mao and Yang, who both attended the health seminar, recently learned they qualified for the MetroHealth program. Yang visited Dr. Liu Sheng for a medical examination a couple of weeks ago — Yang's first since in Ohio — at Asia Plaza on Payne Avenue and East 30th Street.

"We are extremely happy, we are very satisfied with Dr. Liu," Yang said.

Yang placed a frail hand over her heart, and said she felt as if the weight of more than 13 years of constant worry had been lifted.

"This program helps so much," she said. "We can rest easy, knowing that we can come here if anything happens."

As for that suitcase of pills and packets, Yang said she will take Liu's advice to stop taking medicines she brought from China.

Her husband has yet to schedule a doctor's visit here.

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## ELDERLY CHINESE ON EXTENDED VISITS HERE OFTEN GO WITHOUT ADEQUATE MEDICAL CARE by June Wu

The last place I expected to use my Mandarin was Cleveland.

A couple weeks into my internship at the Plain Dealer, I was surprised to find that certain pockets of neighborhoods in Greater Cleveland had seen a growing population of Chinese immigrants in recent years. While I was there, a group of Chinese doctors in the area were attempting to reach out to this population about medical issues specific to the community, including visiting grandparents who come from China on extended stays without health insurance. Many did not speak English, and preferred taking traditional remedies to seeing American doctors anyway.

I was immediately reminded of my own grandparents and the many suitcases of pills and herbal medicines they'd lug over to Michigan from Hangzhou. I then picked up the phone and called my grandmother back home for a crash tutorial on medical lingo. I wasn't sure how to say "hypertension" or "kidney stone" in Mandarin.

Finding elderly Chinese grandparents for the article was difficult, and convincing them to tell their story even more so. The local Chinese doctors keen on talking to me about medical issues this population faced declined to let me talk to their parents. I left many voicemails in Mandarin and got few calls in response. I wheedled when I got a hold of a potential grandparent on the phone, and described the similar circumstances my own grandparents faced while I was growing up. I finally found an elderly couple willing to share their experiences with me.

This was one of the first few features I had pitched and worked on during my Kaiser internship at the *Plain Dealer*. And it remains one of my most frustrating and favorite stories I had the opportunity to follow this summer.

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