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Modernizing Mental Health Care in China

January 31, 2008; Page A15

We were greatly moved by your "Caged in China" (Jan. 16) article, poignantly portraying the plight of people with major mental illnesses in mainland China.

People with major mental illnesses are much more likely to hurt themselves than they are likely to hurt others. The World Health Organization estimates that 10% of people with schizophrenia suffer so terribly that they take their own lives. In fact, it is estimated that 90% of the 873,000 suicides per year in the world are related to mental illness. As the executive director of an international organization of "Clubhouse" programs for people with mental illness, I know many more people with mental illness attempt to take their own lives. The horrible treatment of people with mental illness goes far beyond that portrayed in your article - people chained to trees, heads cut open by witch doctors and the widespread use of caging.

In partnership with our well-established program in Hong Kong, Phoenix Clubhouse, under the auspices of Queen Mary Hospital and Hong Kong University, the International Center for Clubhouse Development, is working in mainland China to present a community-based Clubhouse Model. Rather than managing people with serious mental illness by isolating them from the world, ICCD Clubhouses present an alternative that draws on the talents and abilities of "members" to create cost effective communities of life-time support and opportunity.

Our first program in the mainland, Heart Wing Clubhouse, opened in Changsha, Hunan, last July. Clubhouse working groups are moving forward in other mainland cities, but the greatest challenge, as your article points out, is in the countryside. For those interested in the world-wide spread of the Clubhouse Model, information can be found on our Web site at www.iccd.org.

Joel D. Corcoran
Executive Director
International Center for Clubhouse Development
New York

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PAGE ONE

Caged in China: Parents Grapple With Mentally Ill

Unable to Control Son, Wang Family Used a Pen; Hospital Costs Out of Reach

By NICHOLAS ZAMISKA
January 16, 2008; Page A1

JIAOXI, China -- For more than three years, Wang Guocheng lived in a small cage in his parents' house.

In 2003, Mr. Wang, who grew up in this rural town in eastern China, stabbed a neighbor to death. He was arrested, then released when the police realized he was mentally ill. Mr. Wang's family couldn't afford to hospitalize him, and villagers were afraid he might strike again.



The walls of the Wangs' home still bear the inscriptions Guocheng etched with his fingers as far as his arms would reach outside his cage.

So Mr. Wang, now in his late thirties, was kept in a cage at home. His father, Wang Yanxu, who grows apple trees, says during that time he never let his son out of the cage, which was about six feet high, seven feet long and three feet wide.

Mr. Wang's confinement by his family isn't unique. The caging of the convulsions that the nation's health-care system has

gone through in the past few decades.

Under Mao Zedong, the quality of health care -- psychiatric and otherwise -- was minimal at best, and the government sometimes persecuted political dissidents under the guise of psychiatric treatment. But the socialist state did manage to provide basic medical care to those who needed it in most cases, including rudimentary treatment for mental illness.

The country's gradual shift away from communism in the late 1970s came at a high cost to health care. Today, even though the government has rolled out a modest insurance plan for much of the population, the payouts are limited, leaving most with no functional health insurance -- and destitute when serious illness strikes.

In the cities, where incomes and awareness of mental illness have increased, some progress is being made. But in rural China, patients suffering from schizophrenia are largely left to their own devices. Families consult witch doctors in search of cures and, in extreme cases, will sometimes cage their own children with the tacit, and sometimes explicit, consent of local officials and police.

"I kept my son in an iron cage for more than six years," says 53-year-old Zhang Meiying, in Gaomi City, Shandong province. Ms. Zhang earns about \$1.60 a day working at a small factory that collects scraps of fabric and resells them to factories as cleaning rags. She couldn't afford to hospitalize her son, who is around 25, at a cost of about \$500 a month. So, when he grew increasingly violent, she decided to build a cage at home to restrain him.

Neighbors donated iron rods. When the cage was ready, Ms. Zhang asked three young men to tie her son up as he slept and put him inside. She remembers his screams. "I was afraid to see it, so I left," she says. Her son finally was hospitalized at the government's expense, after local news media reported on the situation.

Covering Hospitalization

China's Ministry of Health said in a written statement that "there are definitely some families who lock patients with mental illness at home to prevent them from making trouble, but it is still not common in the whole country." The ministry added that since 2003, the government has covered the cost of medicine and hospitalization for patients with serious mental illness

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in the countryside. As of last year, 70,000 such patients received medication free of charge, and 6,000 patients were hospitalized at no cost to families, the ministry said.

Wang Guocheng started showing signs of mental illness at about the age of 21, when he was a soldier stationed in Inner Mongolia, according to his 77-year-old father, Wang Yanxu. Sent home, Guocheng had trouble speaking, was quick to anger and repeatedly smashed windows in the family's home, recalls Yanxu. Yanxu took his son to a mental hospital, where doctors said he was schizophrenic.

Guocheng was hospitalized for nearly a month, at a cost of about \$130. The family quickly ran out of money. Over the next decade, Guocheng's parents sent him back to the hospital several times for short stays when they could afford to.



Wang Yanxu

Guocheng's condition deteriorated. His father says he attacked people on the street, threw hot cooking oil at his parents and walked around the village screaming. At one point, Guocheng spent his time painting over slogans written on power poles by supporters of Falun Gong, a banned spiritual movement. Adamantly opposed to the group, Guocheng once held a knife to his father's neck, saying, "If you are a member of Falun Gong, I will kill you," his father recalls.

On Aug. 23, 2003, Guocheng stole a knife from a roast-pork vendor in the village and stabbed an old woman to death, according to a legal complaint filed by Shi Shumao, the victim's son. Jiaoxi police arrested Guocheng that day. Mr. Shi later sued the family for \$6,430 in compensation and won, although the Wangs couldn't afford to pay.

Yanxu says that his son didn't mean to kill the woman and had mistaken her for another person, who Yanxu says had beaten Guocheng for stealing a rose from a garden.

Guocheng was supposed to stay in prison for five years, Yanxu says. But a few months after the stabbing, the Jiaozhou Public Security Bureau released him because of his mental illness.

Village and security officials decided to build a cage to contain Guocheng, according to his father. An official in the public-affairs office of the Public Security Bureau in Qingdao, a major city near the family's home, denied that the police proposed caging Guocheng. "His father wanted to take him back home, as they had no money to send him to the hospital," said the police official, who declined to give his name. "Villagers were scared of him and requested that his family control him carefully." The PSB official declined to comment on the legality of keeping Guocheng caged.

Illegal Detentions

Extrajudicial detentions, including caging patients with mental illness at home, are illegal in China, according to Wang Xiangdong, who works for the World Health Organization at its regional headquarters in Manila.

For the next three years, Guocheng lived in the cage. He scratched elaborate designs on the room's limestone wall with his fingers.

One day last March, Yanxu was working in the fields and heard there was trouble back home. When he arrived, police had blocked the door. Guocheng had somehow broken one of the bars loose from the top of his cage, crawled through the hole, and killed his mother, Leng Jizhen. He beat her to death with the bar, according to Yanxu. Guocheng voluntarily returned to the cage after the killing, according to his father, who adds that local officials eventually repaired the cage and locked Guocheng up again. The security bureau official, without elaborating, confirmed that Guocheng returned to the cage on his own.

On March 21, the Peninsula City News, a Chinese-language newspaper in Shandong province, published a story about the murder, along with photos of Guocheng in his cage.

Five days later, Guocheng was admitted to the Jiaozhou Mental Disease Recovery Hospital, according to Ma Changzheng, a doctor there. In Jiaozhou, the local civil-affairs bureau agreed to pay for Guocheng's hospitalization, signing a long-term contract of \$1,600 a year.

--Kersten Zhang in Beijing contributed to this article.

Write to Nicholas Zamiska at nicholas.zamiska@wsj.com

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