

Exploring an Innovative Palliative Care Model in Rural China

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Key highlights:

- Palliative care started relatively late in mainland China. Despite extensive government promotion, it has encountered roadblocks in its dissemination due to the deeply rooted influence of traditional opinions toward life and death in the culture.
- In 2022, the total number of deaths in China was 10.42 million, among whom less than 0.3% had access to palliative care services.
- Future clinical and research efforts are warranted to develop strategies that combine high-quality palliative care services with universal accessibility

The concept of palliative care was first introduced to mainland China in 1988 and its development has been slow despite diligent promotion by the Chinese government. It was not until three decades later in 2017 that the Chinese National Health Commission launched a nationwide initiative to support pilot palliative care projects. So far, three cohorts of pilot programs have been implemented in 31 provinces of China, resulting in observable accomplishments and impact. However, its acceptance among the public remains limited due to the existence of death-avoidance within the culture, especially a deeply ingrained traditional view of an omen linked to death [1].

Great strides have been made worldwide in providing cancer patients with access to palliative care but its dissemination in rural areas has been limited [2]. Similarly, palliative care in China currently concentrates in large metropolitan cities with advanced socioeconomic

development, mainly accessible to high-end client groups; it is often difficult for the general public to access such services. According to publicly available data, in 2022, the total number of deaths in China was nearly 10.42 million , but less than 0.3% had access to palliative care services prior to death. For this reason, it is of high urgency to explore innovative ways to effectively promote the concept of palliative care and improve the quality of end-of-life care for older adults in China. Below we describe a case with a two-fold purpose: 1) to illustrate how the principle of palliative care is reflected in the process of assisting an older adult fulfilling their last wishes; and 2) to demonstrate the use of media coverage as a way of disseminating the concept of palliative care to the public.

On May 5, 2023, in Xiaogan City, Hubei Province, a family member of a 70-year-old patient with terminal stage cancer informed healthcare professionals that the patient was aware of his imminent passing, and his greatest wish was to go to Beijing, the capital of China, to see the national flag raising ceremony at Tiananmen Square. Upon learning about this situation, healthcare workers at a township health clinic in Xiaogan City decided to assist this older man in fulfilling this wish. However, the patient was experiencing a significant accumulation of fluid in both chest cavities, and with obvious respiratory distress undertaking a long-distance journey undoubtedly carried risks.

After a careful medical assessment, the patient received a chest drainage tube, which alleviated his respiratory difficulty. Accompanied by healthcare professionals and equipped with necessary medical equipment and medications, the patient embarked on a journey in an ambulance. After a two-day journey of over 1,100 kilometers, they finally arrived in Beijing, the capital of China.

On the morning of May 9, the patient stood up and saluted the national flag during the flag-raising ceremony. With great excitement, he said, "I have finally fulfilled my last wish." This event touched the public, attracting the attention of numerous media outlets and raised public awareness about the quality of end-of-life care. Many people believe that this patient was relatively fortunate, because rural, older adults in China often lack the companionship of their children who have migrated to urban areas for employment. They can experience prolonged loneliness, suffer from age-related illnesses, and lack access to palliative care resources. As a result, rural older adults often are unable to have adequate quality of life during their final days.

As China has a large population, the resources for palliative and hospice care are insufficient to meet the needs of the general public. Based on our long-term practice, we believe that palliative care in China should be developed and made accessible in rural areas. We must actively assist grassroots health and social service institutions in cultivating competence in their healthcare and social care workforce to have palliative care available for rural citizens. We must address the substantial needs of different groups in China by combining high-quality palliative care services with universal accessibility.

However, due to variations in cultural beliefs and local customs, as well as economic reasons, the concept of palliative care is less accepted in rural regions compared to more urban settings which makes its promotion challenging. There is great demand for future medical practices and research to explore palliative care models which have been adapted to the cultural beliefs commonly held by rural, older adults.

The third Global Quality of Death Index evaluation showed that the quality-of-death ranking for Chinese individuals improved from 71st in 2015 to 53rd in 2021 [4]. While this represents significant progress, a long journey remains in enhancing end-of-life care for all.

Increasing access of palliative and hospice care in rural areas, and promoting inclusive palliative care, represents the direction where service professionals and advocates should focus their effort. This direction is essential to achieve the ultimate goal of improved quality of life for older adults with critical illnesses.



Mr. Guangwei Ji is a professional in palliative and hospice care and is also an expert in breast and thyroid surgery. He is currently in charge of the promotion of palliative and hospice care. Additionally, he serves as an adjunct professor of surgery at Wuhan University of Science and Technology, a member of the Palliative Care Professional Committee of the Chinese Anti-Cancer Association, and a member of the Hospital Humanistic Construction Professional Committee of the China Life Care Association. His area of interest lies in caring for patients in the end stages of life with the aim of improving their quality of life.

[Event pictures]



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