

Shuping Wang

Shuping Wang was a pioneer of infection control in Chinese blood donation. She died on Sept 21, 2019.



Hampstead Theatre

Even as child Shuping Wang refused to be complicit in a lie. During the Cultural Revolution, her parents had been paraded onstage, forced to kneel and wear dunce caps in front of thousands of villagers. Her father, a maths teacher in Henan province in central China, had been a soldier in the nationalist army. More than 20 years had passed since then, but the Communists had long memories. The thugs called Shuping a “spy daughter” and demanded that she denounce her parents. No chance. She may have only been 8 years old, but she knew the difference between right and wrong. And when they threw her out of school, she kept on going anyway. After all, the decision to expel her was unjust; she was under no obligation to respect it. She was not allowed inside, so she peered through the window, salvaging what she could of her education.

After an uncle with unimpeachable political credentials adopted her, Shuping was readmitted to school. Those missing few years did not set her back. She graduated from medical college and became an infectious disease specialist. In 1991, she took up a position at a plasma collection station in Henan. Keenly supported by the provincial government, the plasma economy was just taking off. Over the next few years, thousands of peasants in Henan would sell their blood. Some people virtually lived at the collection stations, sleeping, eating, and donating. The donors went from station to station. Those who planned things carefully could even manage to make two donations in the same day. The stations were only interested in the plasma. The

remaining portions of blood were all mixed together and re-infused into the donors. That way the time between donations could be minimised, which was in everyone’s interest.

Shuping quickly realised that there was a serious risk of infection. The stations did not even screen for hepatitis C or HIV. She tested 64 serum samples taken from the donors to her station. 34% came back positive for hepatitis C. She took her concerns to the station leaders, but was fobbed off with the absurd claim that it would be too expensive to take basic safety precautions. So, she went to the Ministry of Health. And in 1993, a new standard was issued stipulating that all blood donors should be tested for hepatitis C.

The success came at a price. “I was kicked out by the station leaders. Plasma collection was for-profit, and my actions impeded the business”, Shuping later wrote. She was moved to the Office of Medical Affairs, where she inspected the 17 collection stations in Zhoukou district. All of them were in dangerous conditions. Hepatitis C was rife. “If an HIV-infected drug user’s blood was mixed into the station, it would spread fast among donors just like hepatitis C virus”, wrote Shuping. “I didn’t want to sit in the office of the Health Bureau waiting for the arrival of an AIDS epidemic.”

The bureau agreed to her request to set up a clinical testing centre, but they refused to fund it. Shuping started running down her savings to buy supplies. She tested 409 samples taken at random from donors to three collection stations. 13% were positive

for HIV. The head of the Health Bureau congratulated her on her efforts, but he refused to take any further action. So Shuping once again decamped to Beijing, where the Institute of Virology confirmed the outbreak.

The authorities back home were furious. “You caused an earthquake for our district”, thundered the director of the Health Bureau. Her testing centre was smashed up and eventually closed down. Shuping was insulted and yelled at; the man who vandalised her testing centre hit her with his baton. She complained to the district commissioner, but was rebuffed. “I knew that all of them were giving me the run-around”, wrote Shuping. “There was nowhere for me to find justice.”

Still, the HIV epidemic could not be denied. In 1996, China suspended the collection stations. When they were re-opened, HIV testing was mandatory. For her efforts, Shuping was fired. Her husband was harassed. Their marriage eventually broke down. In 2001, she left China to begin a new life in the USA. She took the name “Sunshine”, which suited her temperament, remarried, and settled in Utah. “I have since been working over 10 hours every day”, she wrote in 2012. “Hard as it is, I have learned a lot of new technologies and techniques. I am still hoping that, one day, I will be able to apply my experience and skills to serve the Chinese people.” As it turned out, she never returned to China. But Shuping Wang had already done the Chinese people an enormous service. Thousands were saved from infection with HIV and hepatitis C.

Talha Burki