

Physician-Patient Trust and Mistrust in China: A Qualitative Investigation

Arthur Kleinman (Anthropology), Jing-Bao Nie (Medical Ethics), Wei Zhu (Medical Ethics), Eric Campbell (Policy), Joseph Tucker (Clinical Medicine)

Purpose: To determine how physician-patient trust is generated and deteriorates using qualitative methods.

Chinese society now faces a serious crisis of social trust. One manifestation of the growing distrust in society is the deteriorating patient-physician relationship. Trust is essential to providing high-quality health care and the process of health reform. Violence as a result of mistrust has led to public security forces being deployed at many hospitals. Doctors have been severely injured and some have been killed. Although these are small incidents, they reflect a broader trend that raises fundamental questions about physician-patient trust. We will identify physician, institutional, and professional sources of mistrust and mechanisms to systematically improve trust. This multi-disciplinary research project will bring together experts in medical ethics, clinical medicine, and anthropology to interrogate the issue.

Our preliminary research in China suggests that a number of factors may influence physician-patient trust. Broader social relationships, the “red envelope” practice, poor communication, inadequate medical training focused on ethics and professional development could all undermine the relationship between physicians and their patients. The marketization of health care limits visit times, lacks focus on caregiving, and allows pharmaceutical representatives to dominate clinical encounters. Unintended consequences of physician-patient mistrust such as media portrayals and increased police forces may serve to spur further mistrust.

This topic is rife with conflicting personal experience, institutional norms, and local life worlds. This set of complexities introduces unique opportunities for empirical qualitative investigation. Although we recognize discussing trust is a sensitive issue, we have decades of experience in China conducting research with personally and politically sensitive subjects such as sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, and birth control policies. This research will be undertaken in Shanghai at Fudan-affiliated hospitals, taking advantage of the recent Harvard-Fudan memorandum of understanding and a long history of productive Harvard-Fudan cooperation. Implementation of the project would incorporate Harvard anthropology students and Fudan medical ethics students. In-depth interviews will be conducted one-on-one with the explicit approval of the head of the hospital and municipal health bureau. The total number of participants will depend on thematic saturation. We will selectively recruit a diverse group of stakeholders to include the following: Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners; clinicians and leaders; final-year medical students, junior physicians, and senior physicians; different level hospitals; patients and their families. Data will be recorded, transcribed, translated, and analyzed using standard qualitative research techniques.

The outcomes of this research will be an English academic manuscript and a Chinese policy white paper. The academic deliverable will identify the social and contextual factors that contribute to and deteriorate physician-patient trust. The policy deliverable will establish a set of recommendations for health systems interventions, communication strategies, and medical training reform in order to build physician-patient trust.