

Primary Eye Care in China

An emerging field of growing opportunity.

BY MING WANG, MD, PhD

A new era for China dawned in 2011. In the past year, the country surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy and the United States' largest creditor. China has also become a large and attractive new market for goods and services produced all over the world thanks to a huge trade surplus with the United States (more than \$250 billion a year), an economy that is growing at an astoundingly rapid rate, and increasing demand from its population for higher-quality goods and services.

Surprisingly, primary medical care does not exist in China. Due to a significant shortage of primary care physicians (including ophthalmologists), Chinese citizens must visit hospitals for their medical care and see whichever doctors are on duty. This situation is changing rapidly.

EYE CARE TODAY

Currently, the level of eye care in China is far behind that of the United States. Cataracts and degenerative myopia are the most significant causes of visual disability. The association between myopia and glaucoma is strong, but there is a lower incidence of retinal disease such as age-related macular degeneration in China than in the West.

Calculated on the basis of per million population per year, only 500 patients undergo cataract surgery in China versus 5,000 in the United States. In other words, the coverage of cataract surgical care is about 10% of that in the United States. That tallies to 700,000 cataract surgeries (patients) or 1.4 million procedures (eyes) performed each year in China, with a backlog of 5 million cases. If not one new cataract formed starting today, 7 years would pass before all of China's current cataract patients were treated. Even patients with advanced cataracts (20/200 or worse BCVA) generally wait 3 years for surgery.

HEALTH CARE REFORM

With the increase in the standard of living in China, citizens are now demanding much higher-quality health

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care. A year ago, the Chinese government unveiled an ambitious plan: \$123 billion in funding to provide universal health care to its citizens within the next 10 years.

Those involved in US health care can participate in China's reform. Specifically, these opportunities include

- training and education
- importing advanced medical technologies into China
- organizing medical records systems and managerial structures
- establishing a medical-legal infrastructure
- engaging in real estate development and hospital management
- making investments and forming joint partnerships
- educating the public about eye disease, its prevention, and treatment
- participating in charitable medical work

MY EXPERIENCE

During the past decade, I have assisted with the development of the Aier Eye Hospital Group. I am a co-owner of Aier and the international president of its flagship hospital, Shanghai Aier Eye Hospital (www.aier021.com). My colleagues and I imported advanced US medical technologies with which we equipped all of the Aier hospitals. We led the way in introducing new technologies to China such as LASIK with the flap created using a femtosecond laser (I performed the first such procedure in China at the Shanghai Aier Eye Hospital in 2005 [Figure 1]).

My colleagues and I are also among the leaders in ophthalmic training and education in China. For example, several months ago, John Marshall, PhD, and I led a regional

INTERNATIONAL



Figure 1. Dr. Wang discusses China's first bladeless LASIK procedure with colleagues.

teaching course for ophthalmologists at Shanghai Aier Hospital. At the September 2010 Asia Pacific Academy of Ophthalmology Congress (APAO) in Beijing, Aier had the highest number of abstracts presented (more than 200) of all the hospitals in China. Aier provides charitable medical care for individuals in the poorest counties and provinces in the country, and its surgeons perform more than 10,000 charitable cataract procedures annually.

The Aier Eye Hospital Group is currently the largest private eye hospital group in China, with 30 freestanding eye hospitals. In 2010, surgeons at its facilities performed 80,000 LASIK procedures (eyes)—10% of China's entire volume. China surpassed the United States for the first time in 2010 in total annual LASIK volume, with more than 800,000 cases (eyes). In that year, the Aier Eye Hospital Group's ophthalmologists performed 70,000 cataract surgeries (eyes), which is 5% of China's annual surgical volume (1.4 million eyes).

CONCLUSION

At present, the quality of medical care in China is significantly lower than in the United States. With its rapidly growing economy and ambitious effort at health care reform, however, China offers unparalleled opportunities in primary medical care to US doctors and businesses. Moreover, China appears capable of funding this reform, thanks to a huge trade surplus with the rest of the world, including the United States. ■

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