

Shanghai Rotary Club initiated National Campaign against Smallpox, 1926

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1 December 2015

Since the inception of the 6 Areas of Focus by Rotary International in recent years, December every year is designated as “Disease Prevention and Treatment Month”, commencing from this Rotary Year 2015-2016.

The concern on disease prevention and treatment is not a new idea of service to address the community need in China. In the year of 1926, Shanghai Rotary Club (上海扶輪社) had paid attention to the public health of the local people, and initiated a national campaign against smallpox.

What is Smallpox

Smallpox (天花) was an infectious disease caused by one of two virus variants, Variola major or Variola minor. The last naturally occurring case of smallpox (Variola minor) was diagnosed on 26 October 1977.

Infection with smallpox is focused in small blood vessels of the skin and in the mouth and throat before disseminating. In the skin it results in a characteristic maculopapular rash and, later, raised fluid-filled blisters. V-major produced a more serious disease and had an overall mortality rate of 30–35%. V-minor caused a milder form of disease (also known as alastrim) which killed about 1% of those it infects. Long-term complications of V-major infection included characteristic scars, commonly on the face, which occur in 65–85% of survivors. Blindness resulting from corneal ulceration and scarring, and limb deformities due to arthritis and osteomyelitis were less common complications, seen in about 2–5% of cases.

Rotary Club in Action

In 1926, a rickshaw coolie slipping through the streets of Shanghai observed a new and colorful poster. Closer inspection showed the coolie the picture of a Chinese boy pointing proudly to a vaccination scar – the caption “To prevent smallpox vaccinate at once.” The coolie padded off, reflecting on the prevalence of “Heavenly Flowers” (smallpox) among the Chinese, especially among the children, many of whom succumb to the disease each year.

The coolie did not reflect on the Committee on Health Education formed by the Shanghai Rotary Club -- probably he had never heard of Rotary. None the less this poster represented the first effort of that Committee -- a nation-wide poster campaign against smallpox. While many Chinese appreciate the danger of the disease the mass of the people need enlightening on the subject.



In order to help people understand the possibility of preventing smallpox, the poster depicted best exemplified the vast improvement that the China Council on Health Education (中華衛生教育會) made in printing and distributing effective health imagery. This poster uses the popular Chinese term “heavenly flowers” (天花) instead of the medical term “皮疹” to describe smallpox. In doing so, it immediately captured the attention of the audience, who saw the health message together with the image of a cute young boy that any Chinese parent might dream of as their own son, pointing towards the vaccine scars on his arm and declaring: “Get a quick vaccine if you don’t want smallpox.” This poster effectively communicated a serious health problem and its easy prevention by projecting a beautiful and healthy young Chinese boy. But there is one mistake in the poster: the boy shows the right arm instead of the left arm. In China, left-handed was and still is vigilantly guarded against by parents and teachers from early childhood; therefore the overwhelming majority of children are right-handed. In the inoculation of vaccines, children were asked to offer their left arms.

The “Council on Health Education” of which Rotarian Dr. William Wesley Peter, M.D. (known as W. W. Peter) (畢德輝醫學博士) (*American Medical Missionary*) (*YMCA Secretary in China 1913-1927*) was director, prepared the poster which was printed in six colors and two sizes. The British American Tobacco Co., Ltd., printed 42,000 sheets at cost, gave outright 7,500 copies of the large one, the same number of the small size. Shanghai Rotary Club President Albert R. Hager and his business equipment organization undertook distribution, prepared 3,700 sheets of suggestions for used in hospitals, schools, etc.; got out 2,600 form letters, 700 individual letters.

Posters were sent to 400 secondary schools, 800 primary schools. Chinese churches and visitors to Shanghai received 1,500 posters among them. The Chinese Red Cross sent 500 posters to its branches. Rotarian Carl Crow through his advertising agency furnished bill-posters and other assistants. Dr. Li, a Canton manufacturer of smallpox vaccine, contributed enough of the serum to vaccinate 18,000 people.

The National Health Prevention Bureau at Peking also sent a large quantity vaccine and the Shanghai Municipal Council offered a 25% discount on quantity purchases of vaccine. Posters and free vaccine were furnished all Chinese and foreign doctors on the lists of the National Medical Association, the China Medical Association. Wheelbarrows were used to haul posters and letters to the post office.

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Smallpox prevention promotion poster in the 1960s



Smallpox prevention promotion photo in 1962 (Xinhua News)