A modest proposal for a new beginning: a Hippocratic Oath for S&T workers

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In the last 30 some years, Chinese scientific research has seen tremendous growth, along with the miraculous economic and social progresses. As an overseas Chinese scientist, I am very proud of the achievements. Rapid growths always come with some side issues that need to be addressed along the way. The problem of scholarly misbehavior in China is well known and the systemic causes of the problem have also been extensively discussed. There is no need for me to repeat them here. Under President Xi’s successful anti-corruption effort, reducing such misbehavior is one component of the effort. What I would like to propose is a modest step towards the solution of this problem. The advantages of the proposal are that it is inexpensive, can be effective, possibly precedent setting, and have worldwide impact. There is also some experimental evidence that it may work.

In the USA as well as some universities in China with which I am familiar, all authors of Ph.D. thesis are required to sign and incorporate as an integral part of their written thesis a pledge that the work is ‘original and not copied from other sources...’; otherwise, the thesis cannot be approved. While someone may falsely sign such a pledge, the consequence is immediate when discovered. Knowing such a requirement also helps to prevent misbehavior from the start.

Hence, I propose that the Chinese Academies of Sciences and of Engineering take lead in initiating and maintain a public National Register for Scholar Pledges. Every scholar starting with leaders is urged to sign a pledge that from ‘this day forward’ they will not engaged in scholarly misbehavior in their work. The register can be divided via disciplines and/or institutions publicly maintain on the World Wide Web (www) for all to see.

The advantages of such a register are numerous. Let me just mention a few of them as to why do I believe the effort is worthwhile.

1. Since the register is public, it will serve as a deterrent against temptations for misbehavior by signers.
2. Any misbehavior will now be the sole responsibility of the signers. This will absolve the institution from any blame/scandal and avoid the Chinese custom ‘not display family dirty laundry in public’ which leads to cover up rather than sanctions.
3. Once started by leading scholars as signers, pressure will begin to exist on other non-signers. (After all, how can anyone be against such a pledge? And why didn’t you sign?)
4. It will be relatively costless for the Academies to implement such a scheme while the benefits are many.
5. It will show the world China’s determination to stop scholarly misbehavior and an example for the rest of the world.

Of course, I am aware that there are obstacles and possible objections to such a scheme. First, it has been my experience and knowledge of China that for any task to succeed, the order must first come from the top. Thus, I urge the CAS and CAE to take lead in initiating this if they feel the effort will be worthwhile. Only their approval is needed. Very little effort on their part is necessary. The scientific public, I believe, will enthusiastically support it.

Second, leading scientists including academicians may consider signing such a register beneath their dignity or even insulting. This is very true. But let me just point out that the medical profession requires all doctors (famous or not, including Nobel laureates) subscribe to the Hippocratic Oath on ethical behavior. If medicine practices this, why shouldn’t all sciences and technology? If the S&T leaders such as the Academies of Sciences and of Engineering take lead in organizing such a register, no one should feel this as an insult. In fact, by taking the lead to do something for China, one can feel it is an honor to do so. Signing can be viewed as an act of patriotism. You sign not because of personal benefit but as an aspiration for others. Even if an academician genuinely feels it is a sacrifice of his/her dignity to sign, just consider it as a small sacrifice in return for all the benefits the government bestowed on you as a leading scientist or academican.

Third, some people may feel this is a trick by the government to convict them of lying for any indiscretions however small they may have committed in the
past. Hence, the proposal does not address the past and only deals with ‘from this day forward’.

Of course, detailed implementation of such a scheme needs to be worked out. But I leave it to Chinese researchers who are much more familiar with tradition and customs to determine. And for readers who agree with this proposal, you are urged to support it by writing to the Chinese Academies or this journal.

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CLINICAL MEDICINE

MSM and HIV-1 infection in China

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Addressing HIV-1/AIDS problem in China’s complex socioeconomic environment has never been straightforward. Dynamic economic changes over the past few decades continue to create new challenges to intervention efforts, particularly among one of the worst hit and hardest to reach populations, men who have sex with men (MSM). MSM represents a diverse population coming from all walks of life and largely resides in urban settings. Increasing proportion has been coming from young and well-educated professionals, including college students. Developing effective intervention measures to target MSM has become critical to China’s HIV-1/AIDS prevention efforts. Not only does recent data indicate that HIV-1 infections have been rising rapidly among the MSM in China, but studies have shown that Chinese MSM commonly participate in high-risk behaviors that make this population a potential bridge for generalized disease transmission. Comprehensive, coordinated and creative strategies from the key stakeholders need to be implemented and reinforced in a timely fashion before the epidemic runs out of control and further spread into the general population.

ALARMING STATISTICS

HIV-1/AIDS in China was initially identified among populations of intravenous drug users (IDUs) in southwest provinces in 1980’s and commercial blood donors in central provinces in 1990’s [1,2]. Collaborative public health initiatives over the past decade have stopped transmission through illegal blood donation, transfusion and reduced the spread of HIV-1 among IDUs, but infections among MSM continue to rise at alarming rates [2–6]. According to statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Health and UNAIDS [7], MSM comprised only 0.3% of the all cases between 1985 and 2005. This number spiked to 2.5% in 2006, and reached 25.8% in 2014 (Fig. 1). More strikingly, between 2007 and 2009, the proportion of MSM among the new HIV-1 cases jumped from 12.2% to 32.5% [7]. A 2009 national survey of MSM in over 61 major cities found a prevalence as high as 10% in major southwestern cities where the epidemic was first identified, compared to an average prevalence of 5% overall [7]. We recently undertook a prospective study of 8943 MSM in 11 major Chinese cities and showed the average prevalence of HIV-1 infection to be 9.9% with average incidence of 5.5 per 100 person-years (/100PY), a startling number similar to those reported elsewhere [8–10] and notably higher than that of female sex workers (1.4/100PY) and IDUs (0.7/100PY) in China [11]. Considering China’s size and widespread population, national statistics can fail to reflect the severity of localized epidemics. For instance, in one northeastern city, Shenyang, HIV-1 incidence rose from 4.7/100 PY to as high as 10.2/100PY between 2007 and 2009 [12]. These cases were also associated with high incidence.