COMMUNICATION

Doctor Yamei Hu: A Chinese pioneer dedicated to conquering childhood leukemia

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At 95 years of age, Dr. Yamei Hu, an academician of the Chinese Academy of Engineering (CAE), has seen her greatest wish fulfilled: to establish China’s National Children’s Leukemia/Cancer Foundation and the National Children’s Hematology Oncology Center. Dr. Hu’s purpose has always been simple: to allow more children with leukemia to receive effective treatment and to have hope for a new life.

Dr. Hu graduated from the National Medical College of Peking University in July 1947 and then joined Peking Private Children’s Hospital, established by Dr. Futang Zhu, as a resident and attending physician. In 1949, President Zhu donated the hospital to the central government and renamed it Beijing Children’s Hospital. Under this new platform, Dr. Hu served as Deputy Director and Director of the Department of Internal Medicine, Professor of Pediatrics, and President of Beijing Children’s Hospital. In 1994, she was elected to the position of academician of the CAE.

Dr. Hu has pioneered research on childhood leukemia in China since 1976. With little possibility of gaining domestic experience, she cherished any opportunity to learn from foreign experts on the diagnosis and treatment of leukemia and the clinical application of anti-cancer drugs. Based on the specific conditions in China, she and other experts developed the Chinese chemotherapy protocols for childhood acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL). By 1982, Beijing Children’s Hospital had achieved preliminary success in the treatment of children with ALL.

FIGURE 1 Photograph of Dr. Yamei Hu.
with a 4-year disease-free survival rate of 56.4%. Dr. Hu continued to accumulate experience and improved the protocol. By 1992, the 5-year disease-free survival rate of childhood ALL had reached 74%.

Dr. Hu has made every effort to promote the standardized diagnosis and treatment protocol across China. She disseminated the protocol via the Chinese Society of Pediatric Hematology, included the protocol in the classic pediatric textbook “Zhu Futang’s Practical Pediatrics”, and contributed to implementation of the protocol as a clinical pathway endorsed by the National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China. Dr. Hu also promoted the establishment of a national childhood ALL network and organized multiple multicenter diagnosis and treatment events for children with ALL nationwide. After more than 40 years of efforts, the cure rate of childhood ALL at Beijing Children’s Hospital has exceeded 80%, taking a leading position both in China and abroad.

Dr. Hu pays close attention to the mental health of children with leukemia. Under her leadership, the hospital has set up a multi-disciplinary diagnosis and treatment team to intervene for patients with leukemia from various aspects of biology, psychology, and social medicine, so as to achieve both the cure of physical disease and the mental and psychological rehabilitation in these patients. These interventions remarkably improve patients’ quality of life and enable them to enhance their mental well-being and thus return to the community. By the end of 2017, more than 3 000 children with leukemia at Beijing Children’s Hospital had been cured. Many of these children are now grown, college graduates, and are now employed. Former patients with leukemia have given birth to over 50 healthy children.

Despite these successes, the high cost of treatment for childhood leukemia was not adequately supported by the medical insurance programs in the 1980s and 1990s, which placed a heavy burden on the families of patients. Thus, early in December 1991, Dr. Hu began to establish a special fund for childhood leukemia. She appealed to the government to quickly solve the problem of medical insurance for children with major diseases, so as to provide a strong social safety net for more pediatric patients. In addition to her vocal advocacy, Dr. Hu donated all of her “Zhu Futang Prize” money to the Leukemia Foundation.

Although Beijing Children’s Hospital had reached international level as a leader in the treatment of leukemia, the number of children with leukemia that could be treated at the hospital remained small owing to limited availability of hospital beds. However, the number of new cases of childhood leukemia was increasing yearly, forming a huge gap between supply and demand, which made Dr. Hu feel anxious and concerned. She had always had a dream to build a more modern pediatric hematology oncology center that will help more Chinese children with leukemia.

On May 31, 2003, when former Premier Wen Jiabao visited sick children at Beijing Children’s Hospital on the eve of International Children’s Day, Dr. Hu formally proposed the establishment of the Beijing Children’s Hematology Oncology Center, and the Premier agreed on the spot. Later, Dr. Hu wrote to Premier Wen personally, expressing the heartfelt wishes of a highly respected woman. “Statistics at the end of 2000 showed that 10 million new cases of malignant tumors occur per year worldwide, and 8 million people die from malignant tumors every year,” she wrote. “There are more than 400 million children in China, and over 30 000 new cases of malignancies are diagnosed in Chinese children each year. Unfortunately, there is no children’s hematology oncology hospital in China, which is very inconsistent with our status as a global power. Although I am already aged more than 70 years, my greatest wish has yet to be fulfilled: to establish China’s National Children’s Leukemia/Cancer Foundation and the National Children’s Hematology Oncology Center!”

On August 6, 2009, Premier Wen Jiabao visited 86-year-old Hu Yamei. As soon as he was seated, the Premier said to Dr. Hu, “I know clearly that one thing you have in mind is the construction of the Children’s Leukemia Foundation and the Children’s Blood Cancer Center.”

Unfortunately, due to demolition problems, relocation of the construction site was not completed until 2014, 12 years after the project was initiated. Subsequently, construction of Beijing Children’s Hematology Oncology Center had to be stopped owing to other urban planning priorities. However, with the support of the government, the “Trial Medical Security for Childhood Leukemia” was formally included in the Report on the Work of the Government in the Third Session of the Eleventh National People’s Congress. It is believed that this program will benefit more families with children with leukemia, as eagerly hoped for by Dr. Hu.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

No conflicts of interest exists with this manuscript.