

**Focus**

# China is just what the doctor ordered

By Wendy Qian (China Daily)  
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Gilbert Shia has a checkup of a patient at Haiyuncang health service center.  
[Wang Shen / for China Daily]

Gilbert Shia is a 52-year-old British-Chinese general practitioner who works at Haiyuncang community health service station. He is known to his patients as "the Foreign Doctor".

Shia was born and raised in Hong Kong. After more than 30 years of studying and practicing in the UK, with degrees from Cambridge and Oxford, Shia decided to return to China in 2006.

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He said he wanted to challenge himself by trying something new.

"I was at the midpoint of my professional career and I could predict the rest of my path if I had stayed in the county of Oxford until retirement."

He pushed for traditional Chinese medicine to be more widely accepted in the UK, without much success.

"Sadly, the authorities still view it as a folksy custom," said Shia.

He said another reason he decided to leave was because he missed home after years of living in another country.

He came back at the same time as China was announcing plans to reform its medical system.

Shia thought it was a great opportunity to be part of history-in-the-making.

He said he also wanted to contribute to a greater social good.

"I don't have the money of a large corporation to donate but I have my knowledge to benefit society," he said.

Shia chose to work in the State-funded community health service sector because he believes in universal health care and wants to reach out to citizens.

Every day at 7:50 am, Shia arrives at the station on his bicycle. At first, Shia only got to see a few patients each day. Most were elderly Beijing natives and had difficulty understanding him because of his Hong Kong accent.

He also found that his way of writing prescriptions for medicine was incomprehensible to some patients and he needed time to adjust.

Now Shia sees patients for four hours every day, usually seeing each person for around 10 minutes.

According to Shia, the 10-minute rule is a 15-year-old habit from his days with the National Health Service in the UK.

Beijing community hospitals have scarcer resources compared with developed countries and Shia believes doctors in China should learn to manage and use their time efficiently "to achieve the goal of our community".

"Talking to patients one by one about their diets is not efficient," said Shia.

He also would like to see community hospitals sharing resources with large hospitals.

Community doctors should also have a similar status to doctors in large hospitals, he said.

While calling for change from a different perspective than most Chinese community doctors, Shia understands that "China shouldn't copy the West. [The medical system] should develop according to China's special circumstances."

He believes that China's medical system should adopt certain practices from developed countries' and learn from their experiences but, at the same time, Shia suggests that reform policies should be flexible.

He enjoys interacting with people through his job and says he has observed interesting cultural differences between his patients. He finds that penicillin has a great placebo effect on Chinese patients. They would prefer injecting penicillin to cure fevers while British patients, who are on the other extreme, are inclined to go to the doctors for quick checkups but avoid taking their medicine.

Another difference is that most Chinese patients rely heavily on explaining their conditions and previous diagnoses orally to every new doctor, while British patients know their clinical history is documented in a database. Shia believes the latter is more objective.

"When a patient reports information to a doctor, it's very likely for him to cherry-pick the results," said Shia.

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