A patient on a gurney who is receiving oxygen is wheeled into a busy emergency room at a hospital in Beijing, China, on Jan. 2, 2023. (Getty Images)

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Overwhelmed Secondary Hospital in Central China Lacks Drugs, Beds, and Staff: Nurse

By Sophia Lam | January 23, 2023 Updated: January 23, 2023   Print

A secondary hospital in China's central Hunan Province is overcrowded with patients amid the pandemic outbreak that started last December.

"We don't have enough beds; we're running short of medicines; our colleagues have almost all been infected by COVID," claimed a nurse who works at the hospital, adding that only two nurses haven't been infected by COVID so far.

China's hospitals are divided into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

A secondary hospital is similar to a regional or district hospital in the West, has 100 to 500 beds, and is usually set up in a medium-sized city or county. A primary hospital is similar to community hospitals in the West and gets the least allocation of medical resources. The top hospitals are the tertiary ones, similar to tertiary referral hospitals in the West, and get the most medical resources. The cost for medical treatment is usually much more expensive at tertiary hospitals.

Insufficient Beds

The number of patients has been surging since December, according to Xiao Chen (pseudonym), a nurse working for a hospital in Loudi City, Hunan Province.

"We are only a secondary hospital. Though all the beds are open to COVID patients, they are still waiting in long queues," Chen said.

When speaking with the Chinese language edition of The Epoch Times, Chen said that all of the 70-strong beds in her department of respiratory medicine are occupied. "We have now vacated our surgical, neurosurgical, and gynecological departments to accept COVID patients," Chen said.

She added that she felt helpless and sorry for patients who have to wait for a hospital bed.

Shortage of Medicines

The hospital has a serious shortage of drugs because the outbreak has been progressing since last month.

"Doctors can prescribe medicines, but there isn't any available in the pharmacies and the hospital," Chen said. The medicine the hospital still has is Azvudine, and the doctors only prescribe five Azvudine tablets for each patient.

The anti-viral drug Azvudine, was developed by Chinese company Biotech and is approved in China as a treatment for adult COVID-19 patients.

"There is no Ibuprofen, and I myself have never seen the imported American COVID medicine, nor have I heard from any doctor that they have prescribed such medicine," Chen said.

Intravenous immunoglobulin is believed to be effective in strengthening immunity, and patients ask doctors to prescribe it for them.

"Doctors would say, 'There is no medicine, so I cannot prescribe it for you,'" Chen said.

One day she saw a patient's family member bringing intravenous immunoglobulin for the patient and she asked them where they had bought the medicine and how much they paid for it.

They told her that the medicine cost 3,000 yuan (about $440) per dose. "They said the issue is not how expensive the medicine is. They had purchased the medicine through connections," Chen recalled.

Patients and their families don't understand why a hospital wouldn't have medicine for the patients. "We don't know why either; we just don't have medicine," Chen said.

Lacking Medical Staff

Chen said that patients began to surge since Beijing eased up on the anti-COVID restrictions in December.

Medical staff treat COVID patients at a hospital in Wuhan, China on March 19, 2020. (STR/AFP via Getty Images)

"Oh, my gosh! All of a sudden, the hospital was overrun with patients, and almost all of the doctors and nurses were infected except for two nurses," Chen said.

The two nurses had to deal with all of the patients. They had to put on personal protective gear and didn't eat or drink during their work to reduce the need to use the restroom.

"I was positive for COVID and only rested for two days," Chen said.

She worked the night shift, and there was another nurse working with her. "We two had to take care of over 70 patients in our department and we were exhausted; our backs couldn't even straighten up after the night's work," Chen said.

Patients were unhappy when she couldn't respond immediately. "How can we handle so many people at the same time? We nurses are very anxious every day," Chen said.

She added that, although all the doctors and nurses were fully vaccinated, they were still infected with COVID.

"Vaccination is mandatory for us," Chen said.

She said that her physical strength decreased significantly after the infection.

"The infection has caused a lot of damage to the body. My heart beats so fast that I feel like it is jumping out of my throat. The chest is very tight. After a little running, I have difficulty breathing. Before the infection, I went jogging every day. But now I feel it is difficult to walk up the stairs," Chen sighed.

One of her colleagues had to come back to work only days after she was operated on for cancer.

"We work so hard, but our income is so low," Chen said.

According to Chen, her monthly income is now about 4,000 yuan (about $589), even a senior nurse who has over 10 years of work experience earns less than 6,000 yuan ($884) a month.

"Scanning machines can rest, but we can't. We have to keep working as long as we can still breathe," Chen said.

Zhao Fenghua and Hong Ning contributed to this report.