GENERAL HEALTH INFORMATION ABOUT CHINA

China has the largest population in the world: 1.2 billion people. Due to the extensive and effective effort to improve the public health since 1949, and rapid economic growth during the past 20 years, the health of Chinese people has improved substantially. As a result, the population is not only huge but also ageing. The proportion of the population aged 65 and above is presently 7% (13% in Beijing and 14% in Shanghai), but it is predicted that by the year 2015 this group will account for 10% of the population. Life expectancy at birth is 73 years for females, 69 years for males, and 71 years overall.

The disease pattern of communicable diseases that dominated before the 1980s has begun to change to a pattern of non-communicable diseases that dominates currently. Non-communicable diseases rank as the top cause of mortality and morbidity in China. Malignant tumours, cerebrovascular disease, heart disease, and respiratory disease are the main causes of death.

The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in China is about 700 US$. About 4.5% of GDP is spent on the healthcare system with chronic diseases responsible for about 60% of the total health care expenditure.

NEUROLOGY IN CHINA

Neurological diseases rank as the 9 and 10th causes of death in urban China, and 13–15th in rural areas. In urban areas, cerebrovascular disease is the leading cause of death in women, and the second leading cause in men. In rural areas, cerebrovascular disease is the second and third leading cause of death in women and men, respectively.

In China, the first department of neurology was founded in 1921 in Beijing. Neurological departments have been established in other areas since 1933. In the early years, neurology was often included in departments of internal medicine, or together with psychiatry. In Chinese the words ‘neurology’ and ‘psychiatry’ have similar pronunciation, so people are always confused. Even nowadays, some non-neurology doctors still make mistakes.

Now there are 16 732 hospitals in China. In all tertiary hospitals, and in some city hospitals, there is an independent department of neurology. In most city or county hospitals neurology is still a part of internal medicine with some doctors specially trained for neurology in the department. Patients with stroke are looked after by...
neurologists where there is a department of neurology, or by doctors of internal medicine where there is not. Patients can come to neurologists in tertiary hospitals or university teaching hospitals directly without seeing primary care doctors and without first making an appointment. So, in neurological out-patient clinics of tertiary hospitals there are always large numbers of patients each day keeping the neurologists particularly busy. Headache, neurosis, epilepsy, dizziness and parkinsonism are most frequently seen in out-patient clinics, whereas stroke, disorders of the spinal cord and encephalitis are the most common in a neurological ward. Traditional Chinese medicine, including acupuncture, is commonly used in treating neurological diseases in addition to western medicine. It is regarded as having no serious adverse effects although there is no rigorous evidence for many therapies.

TEACHING AND TRAINING
Eighty-two university medical schools are responsible for western medical education, and 26 for traditional Chinese medicine. A 1–3 years rotation in general medicine is required before becoming a neurological specialist. Neurologists are trained for a further 3 years in postgraduate courses after undergraduate medical education, or sometimes by a 1 year continuous education program. A further 3 years university education is needed for a PhD degree. The Government, and some overseas funding agencies, provide various opportunities for training abroad if the candidates have excellent marks in their special examination.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS
The Chinese Medical Association of Neurology and Psychiatry was founded in 1952. During the late 1960s and 1970s the development of neurology almost stopped because of special political reasons. However, neurology in China has developed rapidly since the late 1980s and in the 1990s.


The national conference on neurology (since 1963) and national conference on cerebrovascular diseases take place every four years.

In each province there is a branch of the Chinese Medical Association of Neurology, which holds a provincial annual meeting for doctors interested in neurology.

The first journal of neurology, the Chinese Journal of Neurology and Psychiatry, was launched in 1955. Separated from psychiatry, the Chinese Journal of Neurology was named in 1996. At the moment there are about 10 journals relevant to neurology, most of which were launched in the 1990s but none are, as yet, indexed in Medline.

RESEARCH
For a long time, basic neuroscience research has been done by most academic neurologists. Very few clinical trials were funded by government. In recent years, applied research and clinical study have gradually come to be seen as just as important as basic scientific research, along with disseminating knowledge of clinical epidemiology and evidence-based medicine.

Nowadays, most neurologists in academic departments of neurology in teaching hospitals are able to access the Internet easily. In future more and more Chinese neurologists will be involved in the international community of neurology. This will improve communication between China and the rest of the world, and benefit the development of neurology in China.