

Helping hand

by Tan Yingzi (China Daily)
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Games have much healing power to help children with trauma injuries in a summer camp in Taiwan. Fei Maohua / Xinhua

*NGO reaches out to help with the rehabilitation of Chinese burn survivors this summer.
Tan Yingzi reports:*

Jolene Chinn Swartz had mixed feelings before she and a team of American professionals headed to China to help Chinese burn survivors.

"I have some excitement and some trepidation," the 18-year-old Chinese burn survivor, from Sichuan province, told *China Daily* in a Chinese teahouse near the University of Maryland, Baltimore in the United States. She was accompanied by her adopted mother Brecken Chinn Swartz, the co-founder and the Executive Director of HandReach, an NGO that sponsored the trip.

"Excited that I can help people, but scared of facing all the (burn-injured) kids, it will bring back bad memories."

But after arriving in China, she found her work here very rewarding.

"I am very glad I came," she said. "It is wonderful to work with such great staff to make real improvements in these kids' treatment. The treatment we are able to give is much better than what I received after I was burned, so it's nice to be part of making things better for burn-injured children in China."

In January, the foundation led two doctors and four therapists to Beijing to conduct operations on 10 Chinese children from impoverished families who had suffered severe burn injuries.

Starting from July 3, the 20-member delegation, specializing in the psychosocial healing of pediatric trauma survivors, visited Changsha in Hunan province and Beijing to host summer camps and conference for child trauma survivors, their parents and care providers. Their trip finishes on July 12.

The team has provided treatment and rehabilitation therapy for 40 children in Changsha's Xiaofang Hospital and about 25 children at the Air Force General Hospital in Beijing, all with very severe burn injuries.

Jolene, with five other US high school students, musicians, physical therapists and occupation therapists, have created a unique and colorful experience for Chinese child burn patients with programs in music, drumming, arts and crafts, games, and exercise.

Children currently account for 50 to 60 percent of the total burn-injury population in China, estimated to be well over 10 million, with 450,000 to 1.6 million new children being added to the ranks each year, according to a 2009 report from China Red Cross Foundation.

Some of the world's poorest children are among the highest risks for suffering the world's most expensive injuries – burns and amputations.

The highest percentage of burn-injured children in China, are the children of farmers, factory workers, or migrant laborers, those who are least able to afford long-term care.

Six years ago, Jolene, called Zhou Lin then, was a burn victim from a poor Chinese rural family, who lacked medical treatment and was left at home struggling with pain and a hopeless life.

A faulty kerosene tank at her house exploded and the fire horribly burned Zhou's legs and hands. Doctors in an ill-equipped rural hospital amputated most of her fingers and several toes.

The family went into debt paying the medical bills and they decided to travel to Beijing to beg for money in front of the iconic CCTV television building.

A chance encounter with Brecken changed Zhou's life and the function of HandReach, which began as a provider of micro-grants to resource-poor rural schools in China and has expanded into medical and rehabilitative care projects for child trauma survivors in the developing world.

With Brecken's help, the girl underwent surgery 12 times in the US. Her left hand was reconstructed and she was given prosthetic feet that slip on like boots. Physical therapists taught her how to walk again. Music therapists taught her to strum a dulcimer and write songs about China. Sometimes the instrument was played before surgery to soothe the girl.

But after all the surgery, Brecken found that there was no way to send Zhou back to China, as there is no rehabilitation facility for burn survivors here. So she and her husband Bill decided to adopt the girl so that she could continue to get treatment in the US.

HandReach is bringing some burn injury rehabilitation techniques and equipment to Chinese hospitals this summer.

“In China, everything is focused on surgery, there is no rehab for mental recovery that will help sufferers get on with their lives,” Brecken told *China Daily*.

“Our theme is integration: putting surgery and rehab together, adapted to the children’s needs and interest.”

She believes that there are a lot of techniques, like music and physical therapies – “very inexpensive but very powerful to make the experience much less painful and much more healing” – that Chinese doctors can use in their patient’s recovery programs.

For example, a game where every kid has to hold part of a sheet with a ball on it, lift their arms. And the drumming circle, a popular form of music therapy around the world, helps children with trauma injuries participate and perform with others.

“It’s kind of a big risk, we are entering a new space,” Brecken said. “Because people in China really don’t understand why you are bringing drums into the hospital, why you are making noises. I hope they can be open.”

Before the trip, Brecken was worried about the acceptance of local people about the new techniques, but now she is so excited to see people in China so eager to learn new things.

“We are doing great here in China,” she said. Medical staff from the two hospitals have been “very accommodating and eagerly learning everything they can.”

“Our music therapy team has been especially popular, doing drumming circles with the children both inside and outside the hospital – many people gather and participate with us! It is very fun for everyone, and we’ve been told that it’s the first time our patients have had so much fun after they were injured.”

HandReach plans to set up five hub hospitals in Beijing: Changsha in Hunan province which produces the largest number of fireworks in the world and sees a lot of burn victims, Chengdu in Sichuan province, Lanzhou in Gansu province, and a city in South China.

“It’s a big challenge, but the reward is so beautiful,” she said.

Data from the World Bank and the United Nations suggest that as countries industrialize and urbanize, the high concentration of poor migrants, many of whom live in make-shift housing produces higher number of burn injuries. As such, the incidence of pediatric burn injuries is on the rise in countries like China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and elsewhere in Asia, as well as Africa.



Rehabilitation techniques and equipment provided by NGOs like HandReach bring new hope for children with burn injuries. Fei Maohua / Xinhua