

Document 18.7: Excerpt from “The Price of Health” by Tan Wei in *Beijing Review*, February 2, 2006

Many migrant workers struggle with medical expenses in big cities

...Liu is a farmer from Xinxiang, Henan Province, one of the biggest sources of labor in the country. Since 1999, he has been trying his luck in Beijing with several of his friends. A year-long, hard-earned wage from the farmland was about 1,000 yuan (\$807). “We could not even afford children’s tuition fees in tough years,” said Liu.

Now he works as a porter in Beijing. “I have to work 12 hours a day for 15 yuan (\$1.8), however, the accommodation is provided by the developer, meaning I can save more than 300 yuan (\$37) monthly,” he said.

Liu lives on site in a temporary structure made of cardboard. Taking up most of the 15-square-meter floor space are six beds, some piled with washbowls, mess tins, bedding and luggage. The room is bitterly cold.

According to Liu, most migrants cannot afford the costly medicine and hospitalization when they fall ill. They would rather grin and swallow medicine to help cure common diseases such as a cold.

“We can’t afford the time off to see a doctor, as we lose money,” he complained. Liu’s friend Li Changchun from Sichuan Province said many workers buy their own medication at local pharmacies or bring them from home.

Medical experts note that poor living conditions and exhausting physical pressure are determined causes of the workers’ illnesses. Migrant workers usually engage in dirty, weary and dangerous work, with comparatively low incomes.

Moreover, the workers show little concern for their diet or clean living environment. Over time, physical problems will accumulate and the body’s constitution inevitably sinks into decline, resulting in the high possibility of chronic diseases.

By not addressing ailments in a timely fashion, they may become life-threatening, health experts warn.

Statistical analysis shows that the health condition for migrant workers in Wuhan is far from optimistic. It was calculated that more than 20 percent of workers are infected with the hepatitis B virus, 8 percent are suffering from fatty livers, 5 percent are sick with gall or kidney stones, while 10 percent are afflicted with cardiovascular diseases, with a high incidence rate of hypertension and coronary heart disease.

The situation is even worse for women workers. About 67 percent were suffering from gynecological infections, including hysteromyoma, PID and cervicitis.

Doctors on site

It is reported that the Ministry of Labor and Social Security has urged its subdivisions at all levels to include migrant workers in medical insurance plans, as long as they are employed in urban areas. Starting from 2005, Beijing Municipal Government launched a stipulation that employers should pay full medical insurance premiums, which will cover injuries caused at work.

In fact, most migrant workers ignore their lawful rights when they sign labor contracts with their employers due to ignorance and the great desire to get work. Illegal employment channels are also a factor preventing them from medical security.

The constant movement of these laborers presents yet another obstacle, as keeping tabs on where they are in order to pay medical insurance premiums can become an administration nightmare....

Source: Tan Wei. "The Price of Health." *Beijing Review* 2 Feb. 2006.

Full text available online at http://www.bjreview.com.cn/health/txt/2006-12/19/content_51305.htm