

Profile

William G. Wang, M.D., M.S., Ph.D.

Doctor gives back by sharing his knowledge and skill with open heart surgeons in his home country of China

By Arthur Lightbourn

When Dr. William Wang was a young boy growing up in Shanghai, China, two people especially impacted his life.

First was his cousin, a young girl his age, who couldn't run 10 steps without gasping for air and her lips turning blue.

He was told she was suffering from a fatal congenital heart disease.

"Whoa, I thought, how do we solve this problem? I have to do something."

The second person who influenced the direction of his life was somebody he never met: a contrarian Canadian doctor named Norman Bethune, who performed battlefield surgical operations and trained doctors, nurses and



Dr. William Wang

medics while serving as a medical advisor with the Communist Eighth Route Army during the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1939. He treated both wounded Chinese and Japanese casualties alike.

Years later, Bethune gained international recognition

when Chairman Mao Zedong documented the final months of the doctor's life in China and praised Bethune's "spirit of absolute selflessness" in an essay that became required reading in China's elementary schools during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

The Canadian surgeon contracted blood poisoning after he cut his finger while operating on a soldier and died on Nov. 12, 1939.

Wang was one of those elementary school students inspired by Dr. Bethune, and announced to his parents that he wanted to become a physician.

"My dad and mother didn't want me to do medicine. They wanted me to go into politics. Even right now, politics is the best occupation in China. They have the privilege; they have the power and the have the money."

Wang was born in Shanghai. His father, now 84, is a retired government official and former governor of Qing Hai province.

In 1978, when Wang was 16 and had graduated from high school, he began his medical studies at Shanghai Second Medical University, emerging 10 years later with his medical degree, a master's degree in general and thoracic surgery and a Ph.D. in cardiac surgery.

In China, only 3 percent of the population attains a college education, compared to 22 percent in the U.S.

Coming to the U.S. in 1988, Wang completed fellowships in cardiothoracic surgery at the Arizona Heart Institute, St. Vincent Hospital and Medical Center in Portland, Oregon, and UCSF's California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco, in addition to a general surgical residency at the University of Washington's Swedish Medical Center.

Today, the 48-year-old Wang is a U.S. citizen and cardiothoracic surgeon on the medical staff of Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla. He joined Scripps in 2000. He specializes in open heart and lung surgery; and has been making humanitarian trips back to China four times a



Dr. William Wang (above with Dr. Brad Foltz, an anesthesiologist at Scripps La Jolla and at right) in China.

year for the past 11 years to lecture, exchange medical information and perform surgeries at his own expense.

"I'm Chinese," Wang explained, "and I want to do something for the Chinese people."

We interviewed Dr. Wang in the Schaezel Center medical library on the campus of Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla.

Wang's most recent trip to China was in June for two weeks accompanied by a volunteer team of three other Scripps physicians: Dr. Marc Sedwitz, vascular surgeon and current chief of staff at Scripps La Jolla; Dr. Ali Hamzei, cardiologist; and Dr. Brad Foltz, anesthesiologist.

The Scripps team lectured and exchanged information on the latest open heart surgical procedures with doctors in the Beijing Hospital; performed four congenital heart surgeries on children at the Yodak Hospital in Shanghai; and, at the Bethune International Peace Hospital in Shijiazhuang, performed four open heart surgeries, eight pacemaker implants and three defibrillator implants to monitor and correct life-threatening abnormal heart rhythms, and one gastrectomy on a young woman who was suffering from stomach cancer.

While spending a week at the Peace Hospital in the



remote Hebei Province, the Scripps team also delivered two lectures to a packed auditorium of 3,000 medical students from all over China.

The 1,300-bed Bethune Peace Hospital, dedicated to the memory of Canadian surgeon Norman Bethune, is located on the site where Bethune opened a battlefield hospital more than 70 years ago.

The state of medicine in China, Wang said, is much worse than it was initially when the Chinese Communist government launched a system of universal socialized medicine, Wang said.

"Right now," he said, "with the gradual introduction of a little bit of capitalism into the economy patients are required to pay some of the costs. The regulations specify that the government pays 70 percent and the patient pays 30 percent. But, the truth is, poor people from remote rural areas don't have this kind of money."

"The medical care in

China right now," he said, "you can't compare with the United States. Medical care in China is probably 50 to 60 years behind the United States."

In China, there are an estimated 1,000 to 3,400 cardiothoracic surgeons serving a population of 1.3 billion people. More than 100,000 open heart surgeries are performed yearly in more than 20 hospitals throughout the country and an estimated 8 million people are in need of cardiac surgery.

In the U.S., the Society of Thoracic Surgeons reports there are 3,100 active, practicing cardiothoracic surgeons serving a population of 303 million people.

On his trips to China, Wang brings his own surgical instruments and supplies. "I don't use Chinese instruments, because with them you can't guarantee the surgical results. It really makes a difference. So far, we haven't kill anybody there...No fatalities."

He plans to return to China again this winter.

Quick Facts

Name: William G. Wang, M.D., M.S., Ph.D.

Distinction: Dr. Wang (pronounced "Wong") is a cardiothoracic surgeon on the medical staff of Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla. He travels four times a year to China to teach and perform open heart surgeries.

Born: Shanghai, China

Education: M.D., M.S. in general and thoracic surgery, M.D. /Ph.D. cardiac surgery, Shanghai Second Medical University, China, 1978-1988. Fellowships in cardiothoracic surgery, Arizona Heart Institute, 1988-90; St. Vincent Hospital and Medical Center, Portland, Oregon, 1991-94. General surgery residency, Swedish Medical Center, University of Washington, Seattle, Wash., 1995-96.

Family: He and his wife, Amy, have been married 23 years. They have two children: James, 22, just graduated from UC Berkeley and is attending medical school in Cincinnati, Ohio; and Justin, 8, a student at Sycamore Ridge Elementary School.

Interests: "Giving back" by making frequent medical trips to his native China where he lectures and performs thoracic and open-heart surgical operations. Plays basketball and enjoys customizing and fixing computers. "If you have a computer problem, come to me," he laughs.

Favorite Vacation Spot: "My home."

Reading: Medical journals.

Favorite TV: CNN

Physical Regimen: Runs two miles per day

Philosophy: "Working hard, honesty and loyalty. The three things."