



The Village Midwife

For nine years Jiang Ling Qun has been the village midwife. Each year the 44-year-old woman assists at between 40 and 50 births.

For each birth she is paid between 10 and 30 yuan. Her fee, she says, depends on a family's ability to pay.

There is another midwife in the village, but Jiang says women in Long Wan seldom go to her. She says people come to her because she is considered the most competent and experienced midwife in Long Wan.

Jiang says most village births take place at home, though some women go to the hospital, especially if they're giving birth for the first time. The first birth is always the most difficult and dangerous one, she says.

When a woman gives birth in the village, only women are allowed to be present. It's a tradition that men cannot be in the room when women are giving birth, she says.

Jiang says she learned her skill in a special government class for midwives. Although she is not a doctor, she has a habit of observing the health of the villagers. She says that overall the villagers are healthier today than they were in the past.

Today's most common illnesses are colds, fevers, and stomach ailments, but in the past the villagers had to battle tuberculosis and other more serious diseases. In the past many illnesses often went untreated and became more severe over time.

Villagers who become ill today have several healthcare options. If an illness isn't too serious, they can visit a small clinic in a nearby village. For more serious illnesses, they must go to a hospital in Shuxi County or Zhanjiang, the closest nearby cities.

Jiang says there is a Chinese traditional doctor in the village, but few villagers go to him for treatment because they believe his medical knowledge is limited. Some doctors aren't wise, she says. They don't study their medicine well.

She says people suffering from serious illnesses such as cancer must go the hospital for treatment. Hospitals, however, are expensive and the villagers try to avoid going to them if they can.

If they don't have the money, they must borrow it, she says. If they're rich they'll go to the hospital; if they're not, they will stay a home and try to cure themselves.

A stay in the hospital costs about 50 yuan a day, depending on the illness being treated. Fifty yuan a day is a substantial sum for an ordinary villager, she says. If they don't have the money to pay their bill the hospital won't treat them.

City work units or danwei generally pay the healthcare costs of city dwellers, but villagers must pay for their own healthcare. We feel it's unfair, she says, but there's nothing we can do about it.

Money for Health, Money for Marriage

Yang Chan sits on a small stool in the courtyard of her village home. The 62-year-old woman looks tired and a little unhealthy.

Her hands are calloused from long years of labor in the fields. She has dirt embedded under her fingernails and a mouth full of gold teeth.

Although life in Long Wan is better than it was when she was growing up, it's still not very good, she says. She isn't rich enough to pay for health care and help her sons have a better life.

I don't have enough money to find wives for my two sons, she says. In this village, a young man needs to spend at least 1,000 yuan to get married.

Just arranging to have her son meet with a girl requires paying the girl's family a sum of money. When her son was 27, he was introduced to a girl for the first time, but he is 34 now and still hasn't found a girl to marry, she says.

She suspects her son is having trouble finding a wife because the girls' families think his family is too poor.

Since her two sons have yet to marry, she is unwilling to find a husband for her unmarried 22-year-old daughter, who sits beside her in the courtyard. Losing her daughter now would make life more difficult for her because she doesn't have a daughter-in-law living in the house to help her with the housework.

I still need my daughter to look after me, says Yang, who has badly swollen legs that prohibit her from doing farm work.

Yang sometimes goes to the hospital in Shuixi County to seek treatment for her condition. She says she avoids seeing the village's traditional doctor because she and other villagers no longer have faith in his healing skills.

She says she is confident that the doctors in Shuixi can help her, but she can't afford to go there very often.

Villagers who don't have enough money to see a doctor simply stay at home and hope that the less costly herbal remedies available in the village will cure them, she says.













