

# HEALING YOUNG HEARTS

A doctor-artist alliance is saving the lives of hundreds of children with cardiac problems By Li Nan

On September 1, 20-year-old Tenzin Chonyi decided to celebrate her graduation by dancing with her friends in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, an autonomous region in southwest China. Her nimble steps showed no signs that she had gone through three major operations for a severe congenital heart disease.

The young Tibetan had been wheelchair-bound for the first 15 years of her life, unable to stand. It meant she could not go to school, and at home no one would play with her because of the shortness

of breath that overcame her after the slightest exertion.

So her biggest childhood dream was to put on a backpack, go to school and play with her classmates. That dream eventually came true in 2015, after a succession of operations, the last two by the same cardiac surgeon, Qu Zheng. "Doctor Qu gave me a new life," Chonyi told Beijing Review.

Chonyi's story is part of a philanthropic initiative that has enabled nearly 600 children with congenital heart diseases to receive free treatment over the past seven years.

## Rolling Out the Green Carpet

The 57-year-old Qu is vice president of the Beijing-based Emergency General Hospital. His other identity started when he volunteered for mobile medical services in impoverished areas in Tibet in 2011. After the trip, 30 young patients from these areas were sent to the hospital to receive operations funded by the central government.

Chonyi, then 12, was one of them. When she arrived at the hospital on her mother's back, her lips and fingernails were

purple due to severe lack of oxygen. She was operated on immediately, and Qu was the surgeon. It took 48 hours after the surgery for her lips to turn pink.

Before Children's Day in China on June 1, several artists, who were friends of Qu, volunteered to stage a show for the children.

Yang Zhigang, a well-known actor who took part in the show, decided to sponsor one of the young patients. It gave Qu the idea of creating a platform that would connect ailing children from poor families with celebrity artists willing to help out.

Qu's idea was appreciated by his artist friends, many of whom had grown close to him after he treated their family members. Yin Li, a film director, said doctors and artists can work together. "Doctors can treat physical diseases, while artists can heal emotional wounds," he said. "If we work together, we can offer both physical and emotional treatment."

In February 2012, they launched a website to post information about children in need of help. "Every penny will be used on treatment, and details about every donation posted online," Qu said. The transparency attracted donors. Three months later, the Beijing Quzheng Charity Foundation was founded with Qu as its president.

To raise more funds, charity shows were organized in several cities, including Beijing and Houston in the United States. Dozens of celebrities took part in the shows and visited the young patients in hospitals.

Television actor Xu Guangyu became involved in the foundation after Qu treated his father. "Qu has changed their lives," he said, referring to the children who have received free operations funded by the foundation. "Some are studying in college today and some are married, which was thought impossible earlier. When we see their healthy and happy faces, we feel so satisfied."

The fundraising shows, which have raised 60 percent of the foundation's money, have a special feature. Instead of the

traditional red carpet used elsewhere, they have a green carpet. "The green stands for health and charity. We use the green carpet to thank the celebrities for their contribution," Qu explained.

In May 2016, the foundation formed a volunteers' alliance. Volunteers contribute by either taking part in charity shows or picking up patients from train stations.

## Creating a Network

Along with artists, the foundation has also teamed up with other doctors and hospitals. "Helping children with congenital heart diseases requires collective efforts," Qu told Beijing Review. The Second Affiliated Hospital of Xi'an Jiaotong University in northwest China's Shaanxi province was its first partner. It makes a list of child patients from poor families who need help, and then the foundation and its volunteers stage a charity show in Xi'an to raise funds. The children on the list are then treated at the hospital.

"We give not only funds for operations, but also medical support," Qu said. By virtue of being the chief editor of the Chinese Journal of Cardiovascular Research, he knows many reputed cardiac surgeons across China. If local hospitals need technical help, he can borrow surgeons from other partner hospitals. "It also improves local surgeons' skills," he said.

The collaboration model has become popular among other local hospitals. The Tangshan Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital in Tangshan, an industrial city in north China's Hebei province, joined the pool in 2018. According to Liu Lixin, chief of the hospital's Pediatric Cardiac Surgery Department, the cooperation creates opportunities for his hospital.

Since Tangshan is close to Beijing, many local patients prefer to seek treatment in the capital. But patients funded by Qu's foundation are choosing the Tangshan hospital. "Since last November, we have successfully operated on 106 child patients in our hospital," Liu told Beijing Review.



Qu Zheng, left, offers medical services to students in Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous prefecture, southwest China's Yunnan province, on March 3, 2017.

The foundation also offers online diagnosis service for hospitals in impoverished areas, using cloud technology. When encountering confusing electrocardiograms, doctors in small hospitals can upload the data onto the cloud. The foundation organizes experts in big hospitals to read the electrocardiograms online and send back their diagnosis. All the equipment is sponsored by the foundation's partners.

"It's very convenient. We upload the data with a wireless tablet, and many electrocardiogram puzzles are subsequently solved. It improves our diagnostic capability," said Hu Chaoming, president of Baihe County People's Hospital in Shaanxi.

By the end of August, the foundation had teamed up with 31 hospitals in one third of Chinese provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. Qu said he hopes it can have at least one partner hospital in every provincial-level region.

Also, the online diagnostic sys-

tem has been used in 10 elderly care homes in Beijing, serving more than 60,000 residents.

## No Bed of Roses

Since Qu had promised donors that every penny they gave would be used on patients, the foundation had no money to rent an office or even buy stationery in its initial years. The initiators collected used tables and chairs and started in a free basement provided by local authorities. During the first three years, there was insufficient money to pay the staff. Qu sometimes had to pay them out of his own pocket.

But he never thought of giving up. "When the children recover and their parents say 'thank you' with tears in their eyes, we feel our work is worthwhile," he said.

In 2017, the foundation qualified for public fundraising. It has also topped a nongovernmental organization's list of 7,000 foundations in transparency.

According to China's Charity

Law, 10 percent of the money raised from the public can be used to sustain the operation of charitable organizations. Now the foundation can run its office with that money.

The new vision is to go beyond heart care. Children with impaired hearing and autism are also being treated and the foundation offers scholarships when the children it has treated get admission to medical colleges and universities.

Qu is looking forward to something more ambitious. In 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, which link Asia, Europe, Africa and other regions to allow for greater trade, connectivity and people-to-people exchanges. By the end of July, 136 countries and 30 international organizations had been involved in the initiative.

Qu wants the foundation's green carpet to roll out in other countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative and beyond.

—With contribution by Liang Yuxuan



Qu Zheng, right, operates on a Tibetan child with congenital heart disease in Beijing on May 29, 2011.