

Public health in China: achievements and future challenges



On Oct 27–28, 2018, the fourth *Lancet*–Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences Health Summit will be held in Beijing and will showcase the best research in public health and medical science. Such an event provides an opportunity to present data, debate, and disseminate new knowledge to help define priorities for health leaders and also to reflect on the state of public health in China today.

First, the good news is that health is receiving attention at the highest level. In particular, the launch in October, 2016, of a comprehensive and ambitious plan, Healthy China 2030, signposted China's response to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and willingness to put health in all policies. There has been over the past decades tremendous progress. Life expectancy at birth reached 80 years for women and 73 years for men, there were 2948 maternal deaths in 2015, and under-5 mortality was 11.8 deaths per 1000 livebirths in 2016, according to the Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD). In their assessment of the health-related SDGs, the GBD collaborators noted the considerable progress on the universal health coverage index made between 2000 and 2016. In March, at the National People's Congress, Premier Li Keqiang stressed that basic medical insurance now covers about 1.3 billion people and social old-age pension schemes cover 900 million. Despite expanding coverage, financial risk remains problematic and reducing poverty-inducing health costs is an important issue for China's Government. Over the past decades, China has lifted hundreds of millions of individuals out of poverty and life expectancy has risen drastically, but unevenly—68.4 years in Tibet, 80.2 years in Shanghai. Progress needs to be more evenly distributed—through urban and rural, hukou residents and migrants. Health inequity could threaten achieving the SDGs and Healthy China 2030 goals.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) dominate the burden of disease in China. Stroke, heart diseases, and cancer are leading causes of deaths and disabilities in China. NCDs are on the rise, propelled by an ageing society and unhealthy lifestyles (such as physical activity, diet, and tobacco). Tobacco smoking is alarmingly high—with more than half of Chinese men currently smoking (54% in 2010 and 52% in 2015). Tobacco killed 1 million Chinese people in 2010 and projections suggest it could kill 2 million in 2030. Tobacco smoking in women is

currently relatively low. China has here an opportunity to protect its women from the tobacco epidemic, something many developed countries have utterly failed to do. In *The Lancet Public Health* (April 2018), Xin Liu and colleagues showed that smoking was associated with increased risk of diabetes in the China Kadoorie Biobank cohort—a cohort of 0.5 million Chinese men and women. Importantly, following smoking cessation, there was no excess risks of diabetes, which has potentially important implications for public health leaders.

Beyond tobacco, the Chinese population has been suffocating because of air pollution; an estimated 11% of deaths were attributable to ambient particulate matter. In this issue of *The Lancet Public Health*, Tiantian Li and colleagues report the mortality risk associated with long-term exposure to ambient PM_{2.5} in the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey, a cohort of Chinese men and women aged 65 years or older. These individuals were exposed to a median PM_{2.5} concentration of 50.7 µg/m³ (range 7–113 µg/m³), well beyond the WHO air quality recommended threshold of 10 µg/m³. China's Government, which signed the Paris Agreement to protect the environment, needs to ensure all Chinese people breathe the clean air they deserve. Urbanisation is rapidly reshaping the life of millions of Chinese people and will need to be carefully monitored. The 2018 Tsinghua–Lancet Commission on Healthy Cities in China responds to the rapid urbanisation in China, which brings unprecedented health benefits to its urban population but also creates new challenges for protection of and promotion of health in cities.

As we mark the 40th anniversary of the Alma Ata Declaration, developing a high-performing primary health-care system will be crucial to attain Healthy China 2030 objectives and respond to the need of the Chinese population—leaving no one behind. The strength of a country's primary health-care system substantially improves population health and reduces inequity. *The Lancet* Commission on Primary Care in China will provide health leaders with a roadmap and a set of recommendations. Reducing health inequalities that threaten today's Chinese society should be China's next goal. ■ [The Lancet Public Health](#)

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