

Epidemic sweeps through villages

In mid to late December, many villages were hit by a wave of new COVID-19 infections. Shortly after New Year's Day, the villages lost their usual lively atmosphere. Instead, the elderly gathered together, often coughing, to discuss which of their peers in neighboring villages had passed away. The sound of oboes could be heard throughout the villages, breaking the silence that followed the ban on firecrackers.

For many elderly people in the village, the name Omicron is unfamiliar. They only recognize it as a cold or fever and may ask, 'Are you feeling unwell?' Most of the elderly have underlying health conditions, so if infected, they simply take some cold and fever medicine. In more serious cases, they go to the village health center to receive treatment, but many are not familiar with terms like 'ibuprofen' or 'antigen', which are like a mirage to them. During the epidemic in rural areas of northern Anhui province, some elderly individuals did not survive the winter due to neglect and delay in seeking medical attention.

During the epidemic in rural areas of northern Anhui province, some elderly individuals did not survive the winter due to neglect and delay in seeking medical attention. This observation highlights the importance of timely and proper care for the elderly population. Remaining empty-nesters can only rely on themselves during these difficult times.

"Infected with this disease suffer."

After being infected, 73-year-old Huang Guiqin has been lying in bed, covered with two layers of blankets, with no appetite and body aches. There isn't much medicine at home, only daily medication for high blood pressure and some cold and flu remedies.

In the morning, Huang drinks a large glass of water and takes some pills, but only eats a few mouthfuls of rice before continuing to lie in bed. She says, 'It can be difficult. I heard it takes ten days of lying down to get better.'

Huang's partner also has a fever, but with milder symptoms. She suggested eating pears and oranges to help alleviate the illness and sent her partner to the market to buy them. However, the market was almost sold out of pears and oranges, and the fruit stalls were also less stocked.

Huang sometimes screams in pain, especially at night, and tosses and turns without being able to sleep. The old man rushes over to check on her, taking her temperature and keeping her company throughout the night. Continuous fever does not alleviate. Huang is visibly much skinnier. She cannot control her chewing and even struggles to swallow food. Medicine is difficult to take. She lies in bed with bursts of rapid coughing and wheezing.

Despite this, Huang still refuses to let her partner tell their children. She says, 'What's the use? When the children called to inquire, Huang Guiqin reassured them that the illness was minor and would pass in a couple of days.'

Huang and their partner considered going to the village health center to receive treatment for their sickness. However, the health center was crowded with mostly elderly patients. The village doctor prescribed only small doses of fever-reducing medicine and advised rest for more serious cases. Unfortunately, the clinic had run out of fever-reducing medicine, leaving many patients unable to receive treatment.

During Huang's illness, she experienced great anxiety. Prior to falling ill, she would travel to a nearby village daily to work as a vegetable cutter, earning over 50 yuan per day. Due to the lack of job opportunities for young people in the village, they have resorted to leasing land to grow vegetables, leaving the elderly as the primary labor

force, despite their idle status. When Huang was infected, the owner of the contracted land repeatedly called her to inquire if she could come to work that day.

Despite her illness, she hesitated to decline the request, fearing that she would not be needed to cut the vegetables upon her recovery. Her partner attempted to dissuade her, but Huang insisted that she could not go. "I can earn a little bit now." Huang gradually recovered from her illness and has been able to resume some of her daily activities, such as cutting vegetables with an elderly villager. However, she recently learned that the elderly villager who used to cut vegetables with her has passed away. Despite this news, Huang Guiqin continues to work diligently, taking breaks as needed.

She also mentioned that there is a long line for cremation services.

"There's a line for cremation."

After the 70th Zhang for the next high-speed rail, it was already past eleven o'clock, and the special line of cars to go home had already stopped running. Therefore, he had to rent a car to go home. During the ride, the driver mentioned that his grandfather had passed away due to COVID-19. He was sent to the hospital with a mixed lung infection, had a high fever for two consecutive days, and ultimately could not be saved. Upon hearing this news, Zhang became even more frightened. In the morning, a fellow villager with the same surname called him at work to inform him that his father had been admitted to the hospital and urged him to return home as soon as possible.

Zhang Wei's father is 80 years old and suffers from various health issues, including a history of cerebral infarction, high blood pressure, and high blood fat. Zhang arrived home close to three o'clock in the morning to find an empty house. He sat at the table, stunned, and noticed leftovers from a few days ago and a few white tablets.

The next morning, Zhang Wei rushed to the hospital and found his father in the ward,

using an oxygen mask. Outside the ward, many elderly people were lying down, waiting for an empty bed to become available.

Zhang's brother, who shares the same name, informed him that their father suddenly fainted while using the restroom. He woke up to find his head bleeding and immediately called for medical assistance. Upon arrival at the hospital, their father was placed in the infusion room due to the lack of available wards. The following day, a new ward became available and he was transferred there for further treatment.

Zhang's father's condition has taken a turn for the worse. He has a continuous high fever that medication and fluids cannot easily bring down. To make matters worse, he experienced fever again during the night. The doctor said that his father has a double lung infection and once he is taken off the ventilator, he will be comatose. Additionally, his father has many underlying health conditions that require recuperation and observation. There is no other treatment plan at this time. The doctor also advised Zhang to prepare himself for the possibility of his elderly father passing away.

After hearing this, Zhang Wei sat quietly by his father's bedside for a long time. He then stood outside the ward, watching as someone covered with a white sheet was pulled out. Zhang Wei became increasingly panicked. He remembered that two years ago, his mother had died of an illness, leaving his father to live alone at home. He had brought his father to live in the city, but within a few days, his father couldn't get used to the new environment and went back home. Zhang has a summer vacation home where he spends a considerable amount of time. Two years ago, Zhang's father bought him a smartphone, and since then, video calls have become their primary mode of communication.

He rarely visits his primary residence. Two days before his hospitalization, Zhang assured his father that he would be home for New Year's Eve. This would allow his

father to relax and not worry about his safety. During their video call, Zhang observed that his father was in good health and did not think much of it. Zhang's father was hospitalized on the fifth day due to a drop in his blood oxygen levels to 80, which caused heart and kidney failure. He fell into a coma and eventually passed away.

Zhang brought his father's body back home, and preparations for the funeral were made among close relatives in the village. Unfortunately, many elderly people in the village had also passed away, causing delays in the cremation process and an increase in the price of coffins. Some uncles in the village lamented, 'One cannot even live well, let alone die well.'

“No medicine”

Wang Ning serves as the director of the village health center.

In China's rural medical institutions, the village health office provides the most fundamental medical protection. According to Wang Ning, despite the poor conditions, many elderly people rely on the village health room for medical attention, regardless of the severity of their illnesses, due to its convenience and cost-effectiveness.

Every month, Wang Ning visits the village to measure the blood pressure of the elderly living in empty nests and register their medication information. The village has over 2,000 households, with the majority being elderly individuals left behind. Over time, Wang has become familiar with most of the elderly residents in the village.

Following the release of the 'new ten', the village health center is now permitted to treat patients presenting with ten symptoms, including fever and dry cough. Additionally, the strict control of the 'four types of drugs' can now be relaxed.

Prior to the epidemic, the village had virtually no positive cases. For Wang Ning, this is also his first encounter with the novel coronavirus.

Previously, the village had a dense knot situation. The village took measures and basically bulldozed and sealed off the observation area. However, the sudden change in policy caught Wang Ning's village health clinic off guard. The health clinic usually procures and reports drugs based on monthly dosage, but the sudden wave of epidemics caused the number of infected people in the village to increase steeply. Not only did the health clinic receive more than a hundred patients every day, but the drugs also became increasingly scarce. The availability of medicines is becoming increasingly limited.

We do not have any medication for cold and flu, Lianhua Qingdian, or ibuprofen. Additionally, many elderly individuals are unfamiliar with ibuprofen. We have reported this issue to the township, but they do not have these medications either. Antigens and test strips are even more difficult to obtain in rural areas. Currently, regardless of the test results, individuals with symptoms can only be treated for this particular disease.

Wang Ning is constantly searching for sources of medicine to meet the growing demand of patients. He has requested medicine from the town, but due to short supply, he has had to resort to purchasing from the county and city pharmacies, where prices are significantly higher than usual.

Wang Ning is constantly concerned about his own risk of infection. Despite having only three staff members in the health office, they are responsible for all medical procedures including doctor visits, prescriptions, injections, and infusions. Unfortunately, both village doctors have already been infected, leaving only two staff members to alternate shifts. To prevent infecting his family, Wang Ning has been residing at the health center. Even if his family members become infected, he has no medication to offer.