

Hamilton respiratory experts help Chinese doctors diagnose patients

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Did the 43-year-old Chinese office clerk only have a bad case of asthma or was something else also at play?

He had been diagnosed more than once and prescribed more than one type of medication.

But his wheezing and coughing recurred.

Halfway across the world, Dr. Paul O'Byrne, offered his two cents.

"My own feeling was that this was just very severe asthma," said O'Byrne, a St. Joseph's Healthcare respiratory expert.

The case was one of two O'Byrne and his colleagues considered during a recent video conference held by experts in Hamilton and Guangzhou.

The July 22 consultation was the first time the specialists at the St. Joseph's-based Firestone Institute for Respiratory Health and Guangzhou Institute of Respiratory Diseases assessed patients in tandem.

Co-ordinated from Guangzhou, the two-hour conference was beamed out to more than 9,000 doctors, students and researchers, and more than 1,200 hospitals across China.

The trial run builds on a relationship established in 2012, when Firestone signed a memorandum of understanding with the Guangzhou institute to collaborate on research efforts and exchange personnel.

There are advantages for both institutes, says O'Byrne, Firestone's executive director.

For instance, tuberculosis is much more common in rural parts of China than in Canada, making doctors in the vast Asian country more experienced with the lung disease, O'Byrne noted.

"So I think there are a lot of opportunities to learn about disease management for diseases that we don't see very often here."

On the other hand, asthma is considerably more prevalent in Canada than in China.

"Canadian respirologists have much more experience in treating asthma," said Hongyu (Wendy) Wang, a Firestone research associate who liaises between the two institutes.

But cases of asthma and allergic diseases among adolescents in Guangzhou have increased over the past 15 years, she noted.

It's not clear what's behind the trend. "Right now, this is still the question."

But overall, developing countries have a lower prevalence of asthma than developed countries. One theory, called the Hygiene Hypothesis, suggests a lack of early exposure to infections increases susceptibility to allergic diseases.

Wang, who worked at the Guangzhou institute for a number of years before moving to Hamilton in 2006, says early and accurate diagnoses are critical in providing the best treatment.

The office clerk, for example, had been in hospital several times but his symptoms recurred. Another complication was joint pain and skin rashes, thought to be side-effects of medication.

The ultimate goal of the collaboration is to improve health care, Wang said.

"I think there's no boundary for medicine."

O'Byrne says the institutes plan to conduct more video conferences.

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