

Infectious Disease Challenges in China

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In the late 19th and early 20th century up to the time of the 1949 revolution, China was known as the “sick man of Asia” with high rates of death from infectious and preventable diseases. Control of infectious diseases, rampant in pre Communist China, was an initial priority for the communist government. A campaign approach to public health, utilizing propaganda and mass mobilization, was developed during these early years of the regime, and has been a hallmark of China’s political system ever since. The “barefoot doctors” model, helped make basic primary health care available to most of China’s rural residents. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, a new set of infectious disease challenges faces China. New emerging infectious diseases such as SARS and avian influenza, a resurgence of syphilis and other STDs, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS have created a new set of requirements for infectious disease control in China. At the same time, twenty years of fiscal devolution and privatization of the health system have weakened China’s preventive health infrastructure and rural health service access. The SARS epidemic was a wake- up call for Chinese leaders about the state of the rural health system and its lack of capacity to deal with new threats. In this talk I will review the main infectious disease challenges in China today, recent improvements in addressing those challenges and continuing constraints to success. China’s recent strengthened response to its HIV/AIDS epidemic will serve as an example of how other new threats may be better addressed.