

**The New York Times**

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# *House Calls to Help New York's Elderly Chinese*

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**By Kathleen Teltsch**

Feb. 26, 1989

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*Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.*

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Ka-Lam Pang's world has shrunk to a single narrow room, barely wide enough to accommodate his bed. Bars set in the wall allow him to swing himself along in his wheelchair to reach the stove or sink when he is alone during the long shifts his wife works in a garment factory.

Since a stroke left him partially paralyzed three years ago, Mr. Pang has not left his Eldridge Street room, and there are few visitors. The former construction worker eagerly welcomes a medical team - one of his few contacts with the outside.

The visits by a St. Vincent's Hospital team are part of a nationwide experiment aimed at bringing social and medical services into homes of the elderly. St. Vincent's "Living-At-Home" program is aimed at older Chinese, a group whose traditions of self-sufficiency often leaves them underserved, despite changes in family structure that mean more of them are alone and in need of help. Help in Remaining Home

The visits by a doctor, social worker, nurse and interpreter provide Mr. Pang, 68 years old, and 46 other poor and elderly Chinese in lower Manhattan with free health care and assistance in remaining in their apartments instead of a nursing home.

"He has to be the most upbeat man I see, never complaining, always glad when we come." said Dr. Philip W. Brickner, director of community medicine at the Greenwich Village hospital. "He can't speak English but he says everything by smiling."

Needy Chinese like Mr. Pang are a relatively new phenomena as seekers of medical care, said Dr. Brickner, observing that Americans tend to cling to the stereotyped view that Chinese elderly are always cared for within a close-knit extended family.

But family ties have broken down as new generations of young Chinese have gone to American schools, found employment, and moved away from the Chinatown community to the suburbs. Often, they leave behind the elderly and the frail, who cannot speak English and grow increasingly isolated. Many Are 'Sojourners'

Many of the Chinese needing care are men who came to the United States in the 1920's as "sojourners," workers who found jobs in laundries or restaurants and meant to return home with their savings before war and political changes in China changed their plans. The number needing assistance is growing, here and in San Francisco and Boston, other cities with large Chinese populations, said Dr. Brickner.

As the nation's population as a whole ages, the costs of hospital and nursing home care have soared, leading to a search for alternatives. Living-At-Home was created three years ago by 35 philanthropies led by the Commonwealth Fund of New York and Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia.

Of the 200 hospitals and health agencies that applied, the 20 chosen were judged best able to provide a mix of medical help, counseling, and information about Medicare, food stamps and other government assistance that is available but often not utilized. The \$7 million experiment, which includes programs in East Harlem and in the East 60's and 70's, will reach about 6,000 patients.

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"One accomplishment of this program," said Dr. Morton D. Bogdonoff, director of Living-at-Home, which is administered by New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, "is the experience compelled local agencies providing services to work cooperatively for the patient's benefit."

The program also demonstrated that patients who do not speak English can win access to an array of services with help in dealing with confusing government forms, said Dr. Albert Yee, a Boston internist directing the only other Living-at-Home project aimed at elderly Chinese. 'Birds' Nests and Penicillin'

In some instances, said Dr. Yee, Chinese patients have never been examined by American physicians and have depended on traditional Chinese herbalists or dosed themselves with home remedies. In both Boston and New York, the programs work to accommodate these practices.

But there have been other problems: Many of the Chinese have chronic rather than acute ailments, and Medicare does not reimburse the cost of chronic care home-visits.

The nationwide program provides \$116,000 annually for each of the 20 participating institutions, but this financing is assured only for 18 more months. St. Vincent's, which already substantially supports the program with hospital funds, will keep it going, said Dr. Brickner. Elsewhere, at least 16 are likely to succeed in finding alternative financing, said Dr. Bogdonoff. "They have taken root."

The St. Vincent's blue home-visit van has become a familiar sight at 200 East Fifth Street on Tuesdays - Dr. Brickner's visiting day at Cooper Square Senior Center, a federally subsidized residence for the aged. Watching and Talking

His first call was made to a couple in the program: Fook Wong is 87 and stroke walks with difficulty since suffering a stroke, using two canes. His wife, Ngon Wong is 85, a small, bird-like woman, who presses small gifts of candies on the visitors as she answers the doctor's inquiries. "You can tell a great deal by just watching and talking to people," said Dr. Brickner.

Next, he visits three elderly women, all widowed, who are waiting together for the team in a cheerful, plant-filled apartment. Yuet Woo, 77, has a cough and Dr. Brickner pulls out his stethoscope. Fung Nui Lee, 85, is worried by numbness in her feet and he reassures her about her circulation. Kan Ng, 72, is advised to increase her intake of fluids.

During the half-hour visit, William Lo, a nurse, and Virginia Eng, an interpreter, help provide information about food stamps, invite questions and learn that the three widows are helped by Ko Kwan, Mrs. Ng's daughter. Water Is Restored

On East Broadway, the team climbs two flights to the cramped quarters of Share Bong Chu, who is 85 years old and can neither stand nor walk. The team helped even before they arrived: His running water was restored after three weeks when the landlord, told that visitors were coming, fixed a pipe.

Mr. Chu has no wife or children, but a nephew's wife stops by periodically. He has a dream: to get an apartment in a government-subsidized building.

"I never met a more upbeat man," said Dr. Brickner, forgetting momentarily that he had made the same admiring remark about Mr. Pang.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 1, Page 38 of the National edition with the headline: House Calls to Help New York's Elderly Chinese