

2 disease control officials punished over HIV/AIDS

Two disease control officials in Henan province have been punished for embezzling government subsidies paid to local HIV/AIDS carriers and forcing patients to buy drugs that were not approved by the China Food and Drug Administration.

Xie Yafeng, director of the Luoyang Center for Disease Control and Prevention's infectious diseases department, was expelled from the Party, while Sun Huaiwei was fired as the center's head, news website ThePaper.cn reported on Monday.

In June, the Luoyang commission for discipline inspection received a tip that Xie was abusing his position for personal gain. In addition to pocketing dozens of HIV/AIDS patients' annual subsidies from the local health commission, he also forced patients to pay for treatments that he claimed to be "safe and effective" enough to "cure" the disease, it was told.

According to a patient surnamed Zhu, Xie created a group chat with about 100 patients on WeChat.

"He said the group chat was only for releasing notices. Any discussion or private talk between group members was forbidden," Zhu said.

Zhu, who was a member of the group chat for nearly two years, said Xie seldom communicated about the schedule of free drugs released by the State health authorities.

"Most information was about new trials, or medicine he encouraged us to take," he said.

At the very beginning, participation to those trials or medicines was free. But after a few weeks, Xie asked the participants to pay from 300 to 1,000 yuan (\$45 to \$150), according to the report.

Among the medicines he recommended was an herbal powder—ostensibly a secret recipe from the 77th generation of a famed ancient Chinese doctor, Hua Tuo, who lived in the late Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220). The powder was said to be very effective in curing the disease.

"Most of us really believed in Xie because he was from the government health sector. We are all afraid of death and wanted to grab any possible chance to survive," Zhu said, adding that once they participated in the trial or took the medicine Xie recommended, they would not get the drugs provided free from the local health department.

Since 2016, China has offered free antiviral therapy to all citizens living with HIV/AIDS. Previously, antiviral therapy was offered only to those who had developed low immunity levels, which can lead to life-threatening

infections like pneumonia.

In Henan, the local government also provides a 2,400 yuan annual subsidy to every HIV/AIDS carrier. The subsidy was provided through a deposit card.

"Xie took our deposit cards. But no one expressed anger, because we dared not irritate him. He is someone who could decide whether we lived or died," Zhu said.

Moreover, Xie had requested some patients who were confirmed HIV/AIDS carriers to make a video or take a picture of themselves and provide it to him. The implicit threat was that he could release the pictures and hurt people's reputations, according to Xiao Dong, who runs Tongzhi, an NGO based in Beijing committed to combating AIDS.

"Xie threatened the carriers that if they didn't follow the 'suggestion' from him, he would transfer their health documents to the local CDC where their identification was registered," Xiao said.

"Many HIV/AIDS carriers went outside their hometown to take tests and drugs to hide their health condition from friends and colleagues. Xie's threats hit them in a weak spot," Xiao said, because of the stigma of HIV/AIDS.

After Xie's activities were reported, some patients got their money back, according to Zhu. But no announcement has been made about whether Xie has been prosecuted.

Liu Xixiang, director of the Henan Health and Family Planning Commission's HIV/AIDS prevention office, said traditional Chinese medicine and other antiviral therapies that were involved in the case were not approved by the State Drug and Food Administration, and staff members in the health department are not allowed to be involved in trials.

"Publicity and knowledge about HIV/AIDS should be better promoted, and staff members in health departments should be better regulated in the future to prevent such cases from happening again," Liu said.