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Dr John P Howe III visits young patients in the Shanghai Children's Medical Center. — Courtesy of Shanghai Children's Medical Center



US doctor with heart helps Chinese children

Cai Wenjun

A small-town boy from Maine who once rushed to the library to read the latest National Geographic has been honored with Shanghai's highest award to foreigners for the work of international medical charity Project Hope.

Dr John P Howe III, internist and cardiologist, has seen a lot of the world and helped a lot of people since becoming president and CEO of US-based Project Hope (Health Opportunities for People Everywhere) in 2001.

In September, Howe received the city's prestigious Magnolia Award for his contributions through the Shanghai Children's Medical Center (SCMC). It opened in 1998 with US\$37 million in medical equipment from Project Hope.

Today the center is one of China's leading pediatric hospitals and one of the world's premier pediatric heart centers. Hope continues to donate equipment and sponsor SCMC doctors for overseas training.

Project Hope, founded in 1958, has programs and offices in 35 countries. Its most visible symbol at one time was the US Hope, a converted US Navy hospital ship that sailed the world, delivering badly needed medical treatment, training and health education. Today, its operations are land-based.

In 1983, Project Hope became the first international non-governmental organization to partner with China's Ministry of Health to improve the healthcare system. Today it has 13 programs in China and is involved in children's health and cardiac surgery, diabetes, HIV/AIDS and training of doctors, nurses and health professionals.

"As a doctor, you save people one by one, but in Project Hope, you can save a lot of patients," Howe said of the difference between being a doctor and being a CEO. He was interviewed by Shanghai Daily after receiving the Magnolia Award, given annually to a number of expatriates and foreigners.

"Of course, working for Project Hope



Howe receives the city's prestigious Magnolia Award this year.

is a tougher job," he said. "The hardest part is matching our resources with the needs of the world. Every day I am involved in fundraising."

Howe praised the work of Chinese and American healthcare professionals who contributed to the success of the Shanghai Children's Medical Center.

"The highly specialized, excellent care of young patients at SCMC is an indication of how Project Hope's mission of training local doctors, nurses and health professionals can help build stronger communities for generations to come," he said.

The hospital also shows how cooperation between US groups and Chinese leaders can create expertise and enhance public health in a rapidly emerging country, he added. "Before 1998, the hospital didn't exist. When the city decided to create a world-class children's hospital to meet its commitment to children's health, Project Hope decided to become the partner."

The children's medical center is one of Project Hope's biggest programs and every year it donates around US\$1.5 million for equipment, training and academic exchange. It supports 16 training programs in diabetes, children's nutrition, child development,

critical care medicine, cancer care and other areas. Project Hope also sends rural healthcare workers and professionals for training at SCMC.

Every year more than 3,500 children receive surgery at the hospital for congenital heart defects. That's more than any other hospital performs, said Dr Liu Jinfen, president of the medical center, which also specializes in leukemia treatment.

In 2011 the hospital was accredited by the Joint Commission International (formerly the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations) — the first Chinese pediatric hospital to receive such accreditation.

Project Hope also works in rural areas, training healthcare professionals and donating equipment to hospitals.

Earthquake aid

After the May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan Province, Project Hope and Dr Howe rushed to help. His staff wouldn't permit him to travel there immediately because of aftershocks.

Two weeks later he visited hospitals in Chengdu and Dujiangyan, meeting nine doctors who had been trained at the Shanghai Children's Medical Center.

"They were offering the best treatment to children," Howe said. "I was so glad their skills had improved so much from our program and that they were using those skills to help children injured in the earthquake."

Project Hope now is involved in rehabilitation, donating more than 1 million yuan in equipment to the Dujiangyan People's Hospital.

Dr Howe has come a long way in his personal journey. He was born in Jackson, Tennessee. When he was three years old, his family moved to a small town in western Maine, Bethel, population 2,500. That's where he grew up.

"I had a cow, sheep and chickens and I belonged to the 4-H Club," he said, adding that his lamb won a blue ribbon at the Oxford County Fair. He graduated from Amherst College in

Massachusetts.

When he was 14, he wanted to become a doctor because of his grandfather, who died of a throat infection because back then there was no penicillin. At that time there were only two local doctors, both in general practice.

He was inspired by his father, a university professor of wood chemistry who retired at age 65 and went to divinity school to become a minister. "He told me that where there's a will, there's a way." When he told his father that he wanted to be a doctor, he encouraged him, saying "serendipity works in wondrous ways."

"Then I got a scholarship and went to medical school, working in the morgue three to four nights a week to support myself."

Howe earned a medical degree at Boston University School of Medicine. As a cardiologist, he received referrals of the most complicated cases. He moved to Texas and for 15 years was president of the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

Over the years, awards poured in.

When he took the helm of Project Hope in 2001, he became more of a medical diplomat than a doctor.

"I took the job because it let me see the world, which is what I dreamed of while reading National Geographic as a boy," he said.

"As a boy in a small town in western Maine, I only learned about China from National Geographic."

His mother was a librarian and every month he rushed to the library when the magazine arrived. "It was a window to the outside world for me," he said.

He concluded the interview by citing the case of Maomao, a boy born on August 26 this year with a congenital heart condition. His rural family could not afford medical care, so they took a 27-hour train trip to Shanghai to the Children's Medical Center.

"With the support of Project Hope, little Maomao received surgery and recovered fully," Howe said. "He will live like a healthy child."