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How smooth operators save lives

The Israeli and Chinese surgeons who operated for several hours on 5-year-old Yang Bin's heart were not only closing a hole between the left and right ventricles. They were also strengthening a bridge between their two countries.

This month was not the first time Hebrew could be heard at the Hebei Children's Hospital in Shijiazhuang. It was the eighth trip to China by the Israel-based charity Save a Child's Heart (SACH).

The SACH medics are from the Wolfson Medical Center in Holon, Israel, where Chief of Pediatric Surgery at Hebei Children's Hospital Dr Wang Jianming studied in 2000. Five other Chinese doctors and eight nurses have also worked there.

While training and cooperation have been an essential element of the relationship between SACH and Hebei Children's Hospital, its primary purpose is to help individual children, about 10 of whom can be operated on in a week by the Israeli team.

The hole in Yang Bin's heart is called VSD (ventricular septal defect) and it has prevented him from going to school and his parents from being able to leave him to go to work. His grandfather Yang Lijun heard about the SACH mission on local television and traveled 200 km from his village to see the Israeli doctors.

Throughout the week a single phrase was translated over and over for Yang Bin's and other families: "After the surgery, your child will lead a normal life." With the VSD repaired, the proper amount of blood can flow normally to his lungs and body, so he can breathe more easily and develop his strength.

Within two days of his surgery on Tuesday, Yang Bin was out of the ICU and breathing on his own.

China is only one of SACH's medical partnership countries but in some ways it is an exceptional case. Normally when a SACH team visits a developing country, it examines about 50 to 100 kids, and decides to bring a select number of patients back to Israel for surgical treatment.

"When we go to Africa it's only for clinics, diagnoses and follow-ups," says Dr Alona Raucher-Sternfeld, senior pediatric cardiologist, "because those hospitals are not equipped for heart surgeries."

In Shijiazhuang it is a different story, says SACH director of operations Simon Fisher. "Each time we come back we see more progress being made in terms of infrastructure, equipment and know-how."

The Israeli volunteers brought 30 boxes of disposable materials to Hebei, offsetting one of the biggest costs of surgery, but otherwise they relied on the local hospital's equipment.

They also found a few familiar faces. When Dr Lior Sasson, head of the cardiothoracic surgery department at the Wolfson Medical Center, performed Yang's surgery with local surgeon Han Jiangang, it was one more operation in a series of ongoing educational exchanges between the two Israeli and Chinese doctors.



Israeli Dr Alona Raucher-Sternfeld, senior pediatric cardiologist with SACH, taking an echo for an infant at Hebei Children's Hospital. Alison Klayman

"I would not perform a surgery with another doctor if I didn't already trust his abilities and know we could communicate," says Sasson. "In fact, I am currently training another Chinese doctor from Hebei in Israel right now."

Pediatric surgery chief Wang trained in Israel but thinks the best exchanges happen when the Israelis come to his hospital. "This way we pair up nurses and specialists together, one from my hospital and one from Wolfson Medical Center," he says. "So we learn more than when we go to Israel."

He also says many of the patients themselves get to learn from the SACH mission. "Farmers and peasants don't know a lot about foreigners," Wang says. "When SACH comes here, suddenly they are face to face. Although Israel is so small that you can barely find it on a map, many people know Israel's technology is very good."

This results in more Chinese people favoring the involvement of foreign experts and Sasson is convinced this win-win relationship is here to stay. "The future is with the Chinese," he says.

Thanks to his volunteer efforts and the cooperation between Israeli and Chinese medical professionals, Yang will get to be a part of it.

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