Blood, Sweat and Tears

An octogenarian AIDS activist takes on China

May 1, 2007 By Regan Hofmann

At an age—80—when most people would be reflecting on their life's work, Dr. Gao Yaojie is busy reinventing hers. A retired gynecologist in China, Gao is on a mission to alert the world that China's burgeoning AIDS epidemic is due partly to a national blood supply contaminated with HIV. Risking her safety—the communist government has recently allowed national AIDS awareness campaigns but it is less tolerant of grassroots activists who threaten its honor by claiming the country's blood supply is tainted—Gao travels throughout China's rural Henan Province, educating people about a disease the U.N. claims will affect more than 10 million people in China by 2010 (the current government-approved count of those living with HIV in China is approximately 650,000). Gao, a diminutive woman whose ferocity belies her height, speaks in truncated bursts of Mandarin, alternately squinting in concentration and opening her eyes wide for emphasis. "The No. 1 reason for HIV infection in China is blood transfusions," she says. "[though] there is now also transmission through sex and drug use." Gao insists that HIV is still being spread through government-run blood stations and hospitals throughout the country. "It's illegal to sell blood in China today, but it is still happening."

Gao first encountered HIV when helping to diagnose a woman who contracted the virus from a blood transfusion. Investigation into similar cases led Gao to discover the problem was widespread. So in 1996, Gao used her pension to publish and distribute HIV prevention information to tens of thousands of rural farmers who'd sold blood to government blood banks since the early '90s—repeatedly exposing themselves to HIV.

Gao has since distributed more than 15 issues and 530,000 copies of her newsletter. She has also self-published a book, *Prevention of AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*—300,000 copies of which have made their way to the people of China—and is working on two more. She lives only slightly more comfortably than her readers do; she, too, has no heat in the winter. According to her blog, local government officials have harassed her as she administers care and carries information to those affected by AIDS. When she attempted to get a visa in February to travel to America—to collect a Global Leadership Award granted by the Vital Voices Global Partnership, an international women's group, for her work in human rights—she was reportedly put under house arrest. Informed that Gao wouldn't be permitted to travel to America to collect her award, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote to Chinese president Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. Gao was cleared for departure.

Having received her honor, she was headed back to China as *POZ* went to press. Did she fear going home? “If I compromise my principles, beliefs and values,” she says, “I will be an embarrassment to heaven and to earth.” She stands and raises her tiny hands skyward, then down to her doll-like feet, patting the ground. “You need to live for other people,” she says defiantly, “not for yourself.”

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