

Shanghai virus hospital tries array of treatments in 'big test'

February 18 2020



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In a sprawling medical compound an hour's drive from downtown Shanghai, doctors are employing a patchwork of coronavirus treatments in a race to save victims of an epidemic for which there is still no

established cure.

The Shanghai Public Health Clinical Center is the designated facility for coronavirus cases in China's biggest city, which was previously used to treat victims of the 2002-03 SARS epidemic (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and was hastily expanded to handle the current outbreak.

But doctors said the scale of the COVID-19 health crisis, which has killed more than 1,800 people, mostly in China, and infected nearly 72,500 worldwide, has pushed the medical centre to its limits.

"Admitting so many severe cases all at once is a big test for us," Lu Hongzhou, the centre's co-director, told reporters through a face mask during a government-organised tour on Monday.

The centre so far has admitted 320 confirmed coronavirus cases, 135 of whom have recovered and been discharged, while one has died, Lu said.

All told, Shanghai has reported 333 confirmed cases of the virus, with the sole death being an 88-year-old man.

Doctors at the medical centre are still treating 184 people, including 14 in critical condition.

They are using a mix of methods including anti-viral medications, corticosteroids, blood plasma from recovered patients, and a healthy dose of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

"We have customised treatment plans for critically ill patients, as their conditions vary," Lu said.

"Some are 50 years old. Some are 80. Some have cardiovascular conditions. So, 'one patient, one plan,'" he said.

Some Western experts have questioned using TCM, saying its efficacy remains unproven by science, making it a potentially dangerous placebo.

But Lu said two severe cases who did not respond to anti-viral drugs alone were also administered TCM, after which their conditions improved.

"The combination of both Western and Chinese medicine has achieved a great effect in combating the virus," Lu said, adding that 90 percent of all the hospital's patients were given Chinese medicines.

Yet his colleague Shen Yinzong, the hospital's director of medical services, cautioned that more study was needed.

"We still need to do more clinical trials to prove (TCM's) safety and efficacy," Shen said.

War footing

As drug-makers work towards a vaccine and treatment for the epidemic, Chinese health officials on Monday urged recovered patients to donate blood.

Plasma from such patients contains antibodies that can help reduce the virus load in critically ill patients, the government said.

It has the potential to infect patients with other illnesses carried in the blood, however, requiring rigorous screening of plasma.

The Shanghai medical centre began using plasma in recent days.

"We are positive that this method can be very effective in our patients," Lu said.

The collection of light-yellow, low-rise buildings has gone on something of a war footing, with all staff leave cancelled, and specialists drafted in from a range of other medical facilities.

Those tending to virus patients wear full-body protective suits with a respirator.

Reporters were not permitted to see patients undergoing treatment, with officials citing the health risks.

To protect doctors and staff, dozens of wards have been set up featuring "negative pressure", a ventilation arrangement allowing air to flow into a room but not out, to prevent contaminants escaping.

"We have done a great amount of work to protect our medical staff. In the [negative pressure](#) wards, harmful droplets respired from the patients will be sucked away and filtered," Lu said.

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Citation: Shanghai virus hospital tries array of treatments in 'big test' (2020, February 18)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-shanghai-virus-hospital-array-treatments.html>

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