

An Unexpected First-hand Account of Private Healthcare in China

Two Sundays ago, I had a unique opportunity to meet Prof Zou Wen in Beijing to discuss the possibility of bringing an outstanding exhibition of Olympic Games-related landscape sculpture to Canada. As I was returning on foot from the Dawang Lu subway station, I twisted my right ankle in a hole in the sidewalk, fell forward, landed on my left knee and broke my fall with my right hand. The result? I broke my left kneecap and a bone in my right hand, so here I sit with a full left leg cast and a right hand cast. Not exactly what I expected from my planned three week sojourn in Beijing to study Mandarin!

When I fell, I thought I had merely bruised my left shin and sprained my right hand. With the help of a passer-by, I hobbled two blocks to my hotel and immediately put ice on my leg. After a relatively good sleep, I called Henry Kong, a friend in Beijing who operates two clinics, both of which have been established in excellent hospitals: Peking Union Medical College Hospital and the General Hospital of the Chinese People's Armed Police. Having heard what had happened to me, he arranged for me to see a doctor, who ordered X-rays, which confirmed the two fractures. The X-ray equipment was state-of-the-art, yielding photographs that were more precise than any I had seen.

From there, I was wheeled into a room in the VIP wing that can only be described as five-star luxury. I had two spacious rooms, both of which were fitted with flat-screen panel TV's. The Beijing military's top orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Yang, offered me a choice: surgery or no surgery, both of which would yield the same result. I opted for the latter, so he methodically applied the bandages and plaster, ably assisted by a bone specialist, Dr. Li He, and a young doctor who was doing his orthopedic residency. I felt no pain as they molded the casts and never felt anything but complete confidence in what they were doing.

The newly built wing was spotlessly clean and I was assigned an English-speaking nurse. In addition, given my lack of mobility, I paid for the services of a full-time attendant, who stayed in the other room, on-call 24 hours a day. When I was first told that I would be hospitalized at least 5-6 days, I was very surprised; when I learned I would wear a full-leg cast and a right hand cast for six weeks, I was dismayed. I later learned of a Chinese saying: "Fractured bones require 100 days to heal." So when I learned I would be using crutches for another six weeks after losing the cast, I decided that I would be a model patient, do what the doctors told me, and work as much as my Blackberry would allow.

When my doctors learned that I was scheduled for my annual physical exam in September, they asked if I would prefer to do it while in their hospital. The following morning, I had an ultrasound, a chest X-ray, and a few more blood tests, to add to the profile that they had taken on my arrival.

While in hospital, I received a visit every morning from the hospital's CEO, the head of nursing and on two occasions, was the subject of Grand Rounds for interns. I impressed them with my upbeat nature and my ability to ask for a few things in Mandarin. What was there not to be upbeat about?

Yes, I am fortunate to have been treated like a VIP and grateful to have friends who could arrange that kind of stay for me. I cannot say too many good things about the level of care and the treatment. If ever I need hospitalization again in Beijing, I know immediately where I'll be going!

Paul Stinson, 8 August, 2008

