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As U.S., China Clash Over Coronavirus, Their Doctors Quietly Join Forces

Hundreds of scientists and doctors in the U.S. and China have been holding virtual meetings and trading notes on how to best treat patients



Medical workers put on protective equipment at the beginning of their shifts at an emergency field hospital in New York's Central Park on April 8.

PHOTO: MISHA FRIEDMAN/GETTY IMAGES

BEIJING—The U.S. and China are [at each other's throats](#), bickering over the origins of the coronavirus and bashing each other's handling of the crisis.

Behind the scenes, hundreds of doctors and scientists in the U.S. and China have been using online platforms to hold virtual meetings, trading notes on how best to treat patients and procure needed supplies.

“Being galvanized against a common public health threat proves again and again that medicine and science are a force for good in the world that transcends politics,” said George Daley, the dean of Harvard Medical School, who since February has been working closely with the head of a Chinese government committee of experts on the coronavirus.

The U.S.-China collaboration has extended to clinical trials of potential coronavirus drugs and jump-started longer-term projects, such as a new five-year \$115 million collaboration between [Harvard and the Guangzhou Institute for Respiratory Health](#), funded by one of China's biggest property developers.

COVID-19 Crisis Management and Clinical Experience



A Sino-U.S. webinar on crisis management and clinical experience on Covid-19.

But much of it has taken place between front-line practitioners. Lately, the knowledge has generally been flowing from China, where the pandemic appears to have peaked, to the U.S., where doctors are struggling to contain the [fast-rising jump in cases and deaths](#).

After her laboratory at Baltimore's Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine was shut last month by the coronavirus, infectious-disease expert Annie Antar asked a colleague, Dai Weiwei, to connect Johns Hopkins doctors

with health-care practitioners in China with on-the-ground experience.

Within two days, more than 80 U.S. doctors were connected by video with Wang Jian'an, president of the Second Affiliated Hospital at China's Zhejiang University, and about 10 doctors dialing in from Wuhan.

Weeks earlier, the Zhejiang hospital had sent roughly 170 medical workers to Wuhan, the

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initial center of the outbreak, where they took over a makeshift intensive-care unit and an existing ward in a designated hospital to treat coronavirus patients.

During the hourlong meeting, which was conducted in English, Dr. Antar and the other American doctors peppered their Chinese counterparts with questions on a range of topics, including the clinical course of the disease, treating infected pregnant women and preventing infections among medical workers. "I really wanted to talk to people who had seen a lot of cases themselves," Dr. Antar said afterward. With a dangerous but little-understood virus sweeping the world, she added, the need was greater than ever for "clinical experience with what treatments they thought worked, and what treatments didn't work."

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How China Is Using Soft Power to Rewrite the Coronavirus Narrative



How China Is Using Soft Power to Rewrite the Coronavirus Narrative

China is sending doctors and medical supplies to Italy and other countries that have been hit hard by the coronavirus. WSJ's Eric Sylvers in Milan explains how China is using soft power to change perceptions about its handling of the pandemic. Photo: Moura Balti Touati/Shutterstock

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The collaboration comes against the backdrop of tensions not only between the two governments, which have been characterized by mutual recriminations and name-calling, but between academic institutions in the two countries. U.S. universities have grown more hesitant about hosting Chinese scholars and visas have become scarce as U.S. authorities step up scrutiny of [Beijing's backing for research on sensitive topics](#), particularly in the [sciences](#). But the extraordinary challenge of the coronavirus has pushed some of that aside, at least in the medical realm.

One of the key figures in the trans-Pacific collaboration has been Zhong Nanshan, China's best-known epidemiologist and the former director of the Guangzhou Institute of Respiratory Diseases.

When the coronavirus outbreak began to grow dire in Wuhan in late January, Dr. Zhong—head of a coronavirus expert committee for China's cabinet-level National Health Commission—reached out to Harvard through Hui Ka Yan, a billionaire real estate mogul whose Evergrande Group has endowed several initiatives at Harvard, including an immunological disease center.

Harvard quickly put together a group of about a dozen scientists in the fields of virology, vaccine development, epidemiology and clinical management, recalled Dr. Daley, the Harvard Medical School dean.

"Everyone was eager to help," Dr. Daley said in an interview. "At the time, it wasn't the fear that it was going to become a global pandemic, although there were concerns. The initial communication for my colleagues was to give support and help to our Chinese colleagues."

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During the two teams' first videoconference on Feb. 4, Dr. Zhong sought help on diagnostics, the disease pathology and on strategies for repurposing antivirals, Dr. Daley recalled. Now, two months later, it is Dr. Zhong who has been sharing his expertise with the American medical community.

The Chinese doctor had visited Wuhan in mid January and [his declaration on Jan. 20](#) that the virus [could be transmitted between humans](#) marked a turning point in the world's understanding of the pathogen.

"China was the early epicenter of the crisis," Dr. Daley said. "That also meant that they had the most advanced clinical and scientific knowledge and the deepest understanding of the disease."

Dr. Zhong didn't respond to questions from The Wall Street Journal. In a statement, Evergrande said "developing a vaccine should be the core of the efforts to combat the virus," while the group's deep ties with Harvard make the university a natural choice for collaborating with Chinese researchers.

Gerard Criner, the director of Temple University Hospital's lung center, which has treated hundreds of coronavirus patients in Philadelphia, joined [a March 26 webinar](#) with Dr. Zhong despite being so busy with patients that he didn't have time to take off his scrubs before logging in.

Dr. Criner, who has worked for the past decade with a colleague of Dr. Zhong's at the First Affiliated Hospital of Guangzhou Medical School, credits his China contacts with his hospital's preparations for the pathogen.

"We took advantage of the people that we know in China who were very open and from the beginning they told us, 'You got to get ready and you got to be aggressive,'" Dr. Criner said. "We listen to them and that's what we've done."

Some of the strongest connections are through Chinese-American practitioners working in the U.S. "We knew sooner or later this [epidemic] was going to happen here, because we have such strong ties," said Xu Ruliang, president of the Association of Chinese American Physicians, whose more than 700 members are largely clustered in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut that has been hit hardest by the coronavirus.

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Dr. Jonathan Leibowitz, who runs a private clinic in Brooklyn, has received donations of PPE from the Association of Chinese American Physicians. PHOTOS: JONATHAN LEIBOWITZ

When the outbreak first emerged in Wuhan, Dr. Xu helped send medical supplies to China; now, the doctors' group is shipping China-made masks to the U.S.

"There's going to be tensions between countries," said Elisa Wu, a New York oncologist who is a board member of the Chinese-American doctors' group. "But from where we stand as doctors, the coronavirus is a global issue and we all have to put our political agenda aside."

—Yin Yijun in Shanghai and Liyan Qi in Beijing contributed to this article.