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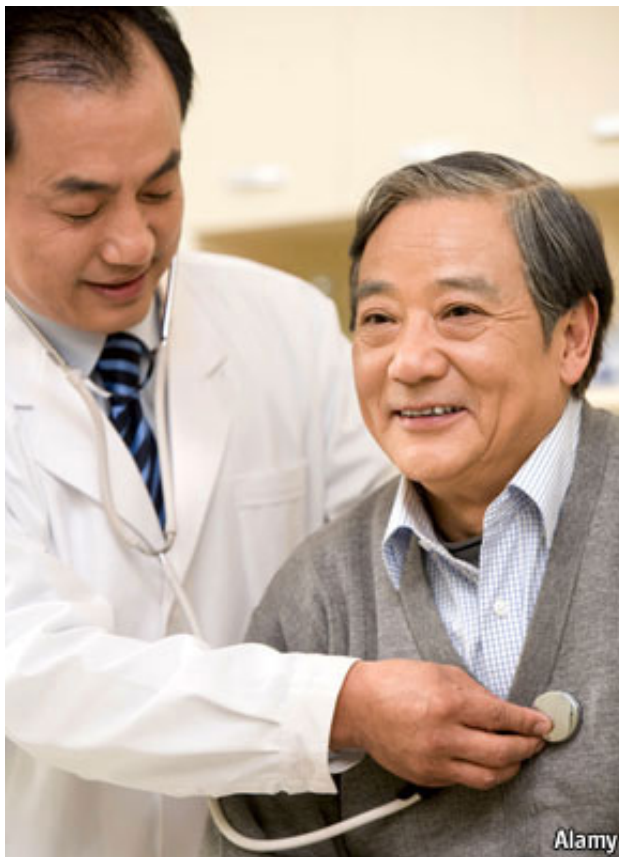
## Violence against doctors

# Heartless attacks

**Medical staff are fearful as anger against their profession grows**

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AFTER a growing number of attacks on medical staff in China, doctors and nurses are finding hospitals



wallet beating

I think I can hear your

increasingly unsafe. According to figures from the Ministry of Health, more than 17,000 “incidents” aimed at hospitals and their staff occurred in 2010, up from around 10,000 five years earlier. In a recent editorial, the *Lancet*, a medical journal published in Britain, warned bluntly that “China’s doctors are in crisis.”

On March 23rd a young man in the northern city of Harbin stabbed four hospital workers, killing one, complaining that he had not received immediate treatment. A health-ministry circular then called for tighter security at all medical institutions, but on April 13th a doctor in Beijing was stabbed, and on May 12th a nurse was attacked in Nanjing.

Last August a full-scale mêlée broke out in the atrium of a hospital in the southern city of Nanchang, between hospital staff and the family and friends of a patient who had died on

the operating table. Over 100 members of staff took up sticks and cans of mace in order to protect themselves.

Medical advocates say many of the confrontations are caused by the families of patients (and the thugs they sometimes hire to help) pushing for more compensation in cases of malpractice, of which there are many. There is also resentment over the cost of treatment and medicine, and over corruption. Even in cities, many doctors earn as little as 5,000 yuan (\$780) each month, and supplement their wages by taking extra payments to see patients or perform operations. Others get their patients to take unnecessary tests, or prescribe expensive drugs to boost their income. On July 18th the Ministry of Health issued a new code of conduct explicitly banning such actions by medical staff.

After the Harbin killing in March, the *People's Daily* newspaper ran the disturbing results of an online poll. Almost two-thirds of the 6,161 people who responded said they were happy about the attack, since it was on a medical worker. The report was quickly taken down, but not before micro-bloggers had saved screenshots and posted them online.

"When the doctor in Harbin was stabbed to death, netizens were cheering for the murderer," says 26-year-old Liang Yingcong, a doctor at Peking University First Hospital in Beijing. "There is something wrong with society," he adds.

Medical staff have found ways of coping. Standing in a corridor of Beijing's shiny, modern Chaoyang Hospital, a nurse says: "We don't respond to verbal attacks and just hope it doesn't get any more serious." A doctor colleague, standing nearby, is worried that there are no extra police in hospitals. "Yes, I'm scared," she says. "But what can we do?"

On April 20th a former patient was sentenced to 15 years in prison for stabbing a surgeon at Beijing's Tongren Hospital, accusing her of botching an operation. But prison does not seem to deter attackers. Officials hope that reforms to the health-care system will help.

From the print edition: China