

AIDS activist mum after release from Chinese prison

After spending 26 days in a detention centre, a prominent Chinese AIDS activist has been released after confessing to breaking the law and leaking state secrets.

Dr. Wan Yanhai, an outspoken physician and critic of China's slow response to HIV/AIDS, had publicized a growing epidemic in Henan province, where many rural villagers were infected because of faulty blood-collection practices at government-sponsored clinics. Western media had previously reported how the blood was collected and sold to manufacture various pharmaceutical products.

Early in August, Wan anonymously

received a secret government report documenting 170 deaths, which he forwarded on an email list. On Aug. 24 Wan was reported missing, and North American human-rights and AIDS groups began lobbying for his release. On Sept. 20 he reappeared and told the BBC that he accepted the government's accusation that he had leaked classified documents and had learned a "good lesson." Wan, who was awarded the first-ever international human rights award from the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and US-based Human Rights Watch in September, has declined media interviews since his release.

"The real reason [behind Wan's arrest] was that this blood collection was organized by the government and they want to hide that," Wan's wife, Su Zhaosheng, told *CMAJ* from Los Angeles, where she attends school.

In July, Chinese authorities banned Wan's activist group — the AIZHI (AIDS) Action Project, which he founded in 1994 — and closed his office. The closure came 4 days after the UN criticized China's inaction concerning HIV/AIDS and warned of an "explosive" AIDS epi-

demio if immediate action wasn't taken.

China acknowledges that 1 million people are infected with HIV. UNAIDS and the World Health Organization reported 30 000 AIDS-related deaths in China in 2001; the Legal Network estimates that 10 million people will become infected there in the next decade.

Wan moved back to China from Los Angeles, where he was a Fulbright New Century Scholar, in June 2002 and disappeared while attempting to set up an independent medical clinic.

This was not his first run-in with Chinese authorities. In 1993 he was accused of promoting homosexuality and supporting prostitution by creating a health-promotion group for gay men and hosting a radio talk show on gay rights in Beijing. A year later, Wan was dismissed from his job with China's Ministry of Health and lost his housing.

"The ability of Dr. Wan and his colleagues to resume their work without harassment will be a barometer of how serious the Chinese government intends to be in responding to the epidemic," said Ralf Jürgens, head of the Legal Network. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



Human Rights Watch

Act Now, an AIDS activist group, demanded the release of Dr. Wan Yanhai

Forget US politicians' promises — Canada still cheap-drug mecca

American seniors are still travelling to Canada via car, bus and the Internet to beat high prescription drug costs (see *CMAJ* 2001;164[2]:244-5). Despite promises by both political parties that Congress would deliver meaningful health care reform, including some drug coverage, voters in next month's mid-term elections say that little, if anything, has changed since they voted in 2000.

Capitalizing on this frustration, one congressional candidate in South Florida has bought TV ads inviting Medicare beneficiaries — disabled people and those 65 and older — to use her hotline to get information about ordering prescription drugs from Canada. "Our neighbours in Canada can buy the very same FDA-approved drugs for 2 to 3 times less than we pay," says Carol Roberts.

The frustration of seniors is palpable this election year because of unkept

promises. There was supposed to be a patient's bill of rights to make it more difficult for HMOs or insurers to deny needed coverage. Patients were also promised new privacy regulations and access to cheaper US-made drugs from Canada, plus the right to sue HMOs. None of these measures were approved, but it was the political gridlock over adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare that caused the most despair and anger. (Most of the 40 million people covered by Medicare do not have drug coverage.)

Democrat Senator Edward Kennedy noted that Washington already pays 75% of prescription drug costs for members of Congress. "How many of us are willing to face our constituents ... knowing that we have secure coverage ... but we reject proposals that do even less for our fellow citizens?"

Why is prescription drug coverage such a huge issue in the US? When retired steelworkers in Pittsburgh lost their health benefits earlier this year after their company filed for bankruptcy, one former employee learned he would have to start paying US\$975 a month for the medication needed by his wife, who has multiple sclerosis.

The American Association of Retired Persons says 26% of the retirees it polled recently would vote against any senator who continues to let partisan differences prevent passage of legislation mandating a prescription drug benefit.

Politicians already know that results like this can't bode well: half of voters in the mid-term elections 4 years ago were over age 50, a percentage that will probably rise again this year. — *Milan Korcok, Florida*