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## **The long march against TB in China**

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Today is World Tuberculosis Day, which recognises the global fight against TB. Although the disease has been curable for over half a century, many parts of the world still suffer from a widespread and persistent TB epidemic.

This day is an important reminder of the health threat that still remains, and also provides an opportunity for careful reflection and creative thinking about what can be done. According to the World Health Organisation, the world's second-largest TB patient population lives in China. Therefore, examining the success, failure and challenges of combating this disease in China is an important and instructive part of this exercise.

TB is still on the rise in China, where 1.5 million new cases and 270,000 deaths occur each year, making it the leading infectious disease killer across the country. The WHO estimates that China accounts for nearly 17 per cent of the world's TB burden. As a result, progress in China's TB control will largely shape global efforts to fight the disease.

Since the early 1990s, Beijing has revitalised its efforts to curb the spread of the epidemic through the implementation and expansion of the Directly Observed Therapy, Short-Course (Dots) strategy, an approach recommended by the WHO.

As the name suggests, the Dots strategy centres on close monitoring of TB patients to ensure that all medication is taken on time and patients carry through their TB therapy. If properly implemented, Dots has a 95 per cent success rate. The strategy has had significant success in China.

Yet, thorough monitoring of TB patients and access to proper health care remain a big challenge. This is in large part due to China's ailing health-care system, particularly in the countryside. Without the proper health-care mechanisms, effective monitoring and treatment of TB patients are very difficult.

To add to this challenge, TB in China hits poor rural areas the hardest: about 80 per cent of patients live in the countryside. The challenges of proper monitoring and health care are further compounded by the heavy influx of rural migrant workers in urban areas. Without a proper residence permit, migrant workers rarely have easy access to the free TB diagnosis and treatment services.

These troubling trends are often coupled with inconsistent TB therapy, wrong treatment regimens or unreliable drug supplies - factors that ease the evolution of TB's resistance to many drugs. WHO statistics indicate that the nation has the world's largest multidrug-resistant TB epidemic. Multidrug-resistant TB is more dangerous and difficult to cure, and the high number of such cases poses a heavy burden on China's health-care system. In addition, the growing challenge of HIV-TB co-infection has complicated a successful anti-TB strategy.

The TB epidemic poses significant risks to the nation's health and development. China will have to fix its rural health-care system with great urgency to ensure rural residents access to affordable, high-quality treatment and care.

As demonstrated in the 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, China's health threats matter to the rest of the world. The success in curbing the spread of the disease also requires political commitment to collaborate with the international community.

Controlling the further spread of TB is an opportunity for Beijing to demonstrate its will and capability to play a pivotal role in confronting global health threats. With a more capable health-care system and collaborative approach at hand, China will be able to contribute to a dramatic turnaround in the global fight against TB.

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