

The Right to Health: National Health Service in China

Yu-Jung (Hope) Lee
PhD student
Government Department
University of Essex
ylee@essex.ac.uk

This paper aims to explore current health insurance system in China. As proclaimed itself as a socialist country, the People's Republic of China government guarantees the right to health for sure. It is true that in the past, the PRC government provides a comprehensive National Health Insurance (NHI) to all citizens. However, after the launch of Open and Reform Policy in 1978, the emergence of internal migration has not only stepped up economic growth, but also challenged the NHI system. It is argued that the urban NHI system does not provide service to those illegal migrants, whereas rural NHI system has raised its medical price due to rapid economic growth. The PRC government thus launches medical reform in the late 1990s as a response.

The launch of medical reform in part is due to the large demand from the Chinese people; people regard going to hospital as a way of keeping in good health. That is to say, the medical expense in China might be higher than other countries as a result of the misuse of drug by Chinese people. In part it is based on the reform of the State Owned Enterprise (SOEs) after the 1990s. It is argued that the state controls and provides everything to its people through out the SOEs, which including health insurance. People within a SOEs unit have privileges in education, medical treatment, and pension etc. The collapse of SOEs has thrown people out from this protective umbrella, which privatised the NHI system. In other words, China has moved the concept of the right to health from a welfare state to a capitalistic state; despite it regards its change as a stage toward Chinese socialism.

This paper purposes to discuss the evolution of the right to health in China. The clarification of the evolution of the NHI in China not only can provide better understanding of the right to health, but also can reveal whether the Chinese concept of human rights has shifted from a socialist to a liberal democratic or not.