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Gates charity pays Chinese to be tested for H.I.V.

TIANJIN, CHINA

But rewards for patients and clinics raise fears of money-making abuses

BY ANDREW JACOBS

A young, boisterous crowd gathered in front of the Purple Tribe nightclub on a recent Friday night, but hardly anyone was interested in going inside.

Instead the men, most of them gay, waited their turn to duck into a dingy storage space next to the club. A needle prick and a wince later, they emerged with a triumphant grin, having exchanged a test tube of blood for a pocketful of cash. "This is my third time in two weeks," Zhang Haoyun, an 18-year-old store clerk, boasted as he walked away holding a cotton swab to the bend of his arm.

On any given night, in 14 cities around the country, hundreds of people flock to makeshift blood collection centers in bars, bathhouses and apartments where workers test for syphilis and H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS. The ambitious testing initiative, started in 2007, is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which will spend \$50 million over five years in an effort to slow the spread of AIDS in China. So far, more than 110,000 people have been tested.

But the Gates H.I.V. prevention program in China is unusual in that it offers a financial incentive to those drawing the blood — about \$9 per sample and an additional \$44 for those that come back positive — that is shared with the donors. The program has provoked a flurry of criticism from some established AIDS organizations that say the money has given rise to a network of fly-by-night groups whose only interest is collecting money from the world's largest private charity.

Here in Tianjin, a city of 11 million people, more than two dozen organizations have sprung up in the past year, many of them run by bar owners or bu-

reaucrats affiliated with the government. Some of the groups do not provide counseling to those giving blood and make little effort to help those who test positive get medical treatment. "Gates has created a huge blood-buying operation that only cares about money, not about people," said Ma Tiecheng, who runs a seven-year-old AIDS organization in the northwest city of Shenyang. "I've seen people taking four H.I.V. tests a day."

With more than \$3 billion in annual giving, the Gates Foundation tends to

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A Chinese child taking H.I.V. medication.

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make waves wherever it directs its largess. It is widely lauded for taking on malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS, among the biggest killers in the developing world, but it has aroused criticism for what some describe as the foundation's resistance to outside viewpoints when charting its programs. Others complain that the huge grants alter the local health care landscape by creating a realm of haves and have-nots among grass-roots organizations.

Here in China, the foundation's stated mission is to identify H.I.V.-infected people as the first step in getting them treated. Those who know their status, Gates policy makers say, are also more likely to modify behavior that puts others at risk of infection.

Although not trumpeted in its promotional materials, the foundation's other goal is more far-reaching: to empower the small but growing crop of nongovernmental groups who stand a better chance of addressing the AIDS epidemic than China's lumbering bureaucracy.

To carry out its mission, the foundation has joined with the Ministry of Health, which funnels \$20 million of the total to about 200 nonprofit groups, many of which exist in a bureaucratic gray zone and are viewed suspiciously by China's authoritarian government. Animosity and distrust flow both ways.

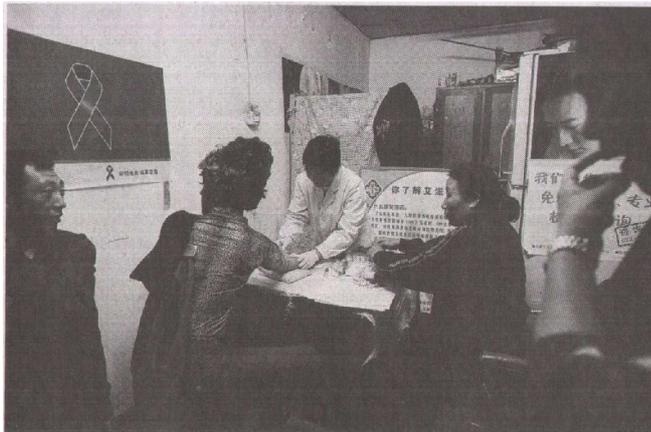
By compelling the government to work with privately run organizations, the foundation is hoping to foster a lasting relationship between the two — and over time lead to more profound changes in Chinese society.

Dr. Ray Yip, who runs the foundation's China effort, acknowledges problems with the program but likens them to growing pains. Fond of colorful analogies, he describes the partnership as an arranged marriage that starts out wobbly but improves over time.

"We are experiencing some of the hiccups of a less-than-perfect arrangement, but we expected that," he said. "If you look historically at arranged marriages, some of them last."

The former director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control office in China, Mr. Yip embraces the Gates Foundation's philosophy of bold initiatives and risk taking — traits often lacking in government-run global health agencies. He says that if some of the money ends up in the pockets of corrupt officials running fake organizations, it is the cost of doing business in China, where government malfeasance is endemic.

Compared with other developing countries, the prevalence of H.I.V. in China is relatively low, with fewer than a million people thought to be carrying the virus, according to government fig-



DUBIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Men being tested for H.I.V. in a storage facility next to the Purple Tribe club in Tianjin. More than 110,000 people have been tested in China under the Gates Foundation program.

ures released last week.

But public health experts are alarmed by a rising infection rate among gay men that has been doubling annually. By the end of 2008, nearly 5 percent of gay men in China's largest cities were thought to be H.I.V. positive; in some cities, that figure exceeds 10 percent. Health officials say gay men now account for a third of all new transmissions, up from 12 percent in 2007.

Advocates for people with AIDS say the government has been ham-handed in its efforts to prevent the spread of H.I.V., in some cases banning the placement of condoms in bars or hounding activists who become too vocal.

Another huge challenge, health care experts say, is the stigma that surrounds the virus. Although the government pays for H.I.V. medication, AIDS is so widely feared that many hospitals refuse to admit people with the disease. In Beijing, for example, AIDS advocates say there are only a handful of surgeons who will operate on those who are positive.

"Every day I deal with people who come here from all over the country seeking help but end up dying because doctors are afraid to touch them," said Meng Lin, who runs a support group for people with AIDS at a hospital in Beijing.

In recent years, organizations have sprung up to fill the breach. Many, like Deep Blue, a group that operates from an apartment in a run-down building on the outskirts of Tianjin, are largely funded by grants from abroad.

Deep Blue's two counselors sit face to face with the 50 people who come each week for an H.I.V. test.

"If you have any questions, contact

the volunteers with the red armbands," says one poster. "You can stop the testing at any time," reads another. About 65 percent of those who test positive came back for regular counseling, according to the group's director, Yang Jie.

Although he appreciates the Gates Foundation's arrival in China and he is happy to take their money, he says the testing program has upset the local dynamic between gay men and groups like his own. The payments have created a class of professional blood donors, and clubs that once welcomed his outreach workers are off-limits because the owners have gotten into the testing business.

"They're afraid you'll poach their customers," he said. Once they have taken blood, such makeshift testing centers, he complained, do little follow-up, which harms the reputation of legitimate groups like his own.

Such concerns are echoed by Tong Ge, a veteran AIDS activist who has advised the Gates Foundation on its China program. He said he wished there were more of an emphasis on training government workers and less money spent on testing, but he is pleased that the philanthropy has arrived in China. His biggest regret, he said, is that the foundation chose to funnel the money through the government.

"So much of the Gates money has ended up nurturing corruption in a place it didn't exist before," he said. Then, after a pause, he added, "but the truth is we can't blame them. The real problem is with China."

Zhang Jing contributed research.