

Should Colleges Open the Door to Teenagers with Diabetes?

By Zhang Xuemei, *Beijing Evening*, November 6th, 2007

The theme of the upcoming World Diabetes Day on November 14th which is lead by the International Diabetes Federation is "Diabetes in Children and Adolescents". However, it is not commonly known that the *instructions on Health examination for the recruitment of Colleges and Universities* have stood in the way of many adolescents with diabetes to go to college. No one knows how many teenagers with diabetes are hiding the truth in order to enter into college life.

A Typical Case: Get up Early to Inject Insulin Secretly

With a box of candy at her bedside and a bottle of insulin in her personal cabinet, Qingqing (anonymous) had to steal into the bathroom every morning to disinfect the needle with alcohol, inject insulin at the thigh or upper arm and then take the carefully-paper-wrapped syringe out to throw away before her roommates got up. Even when taking the interview, Qingqing chose a time when no one else was in the dormitory. Qingqing has no choice but to live on campus because her home is in Daxing district which is far away from the college. As a freshman in college, Qingqing is a tall girl with a sunny disposition. Not only does she take daytime classes, but also spends her spare time in extracurricular activities and holds a post in the student union. No one believes she is a patient, but actually she is a diabetic.

Qingqing said that she has had diabetes for 11 years□but she feels no different from other students except for two injections of insulin every day. She was able to take PE classes, enter a 1500-meter-race and at the beginning of this semester she undertook military training along with her classmates.

Although she retains an optimistic attitude, Qingqing does get depressed sometimes. She has no idea why other disease carriers were allowed into college whilst those with diabetes were not, even though it is not infectious. "I have to try all means to hide it," Qingqing told us. She feared losing her valuable college education because according to present rules and regulations, she could be expelled from school at any moment if her illness was exposed.

Qingqing said that as early as three years ago when she took the high school entrance examination, she and her parents already knew the rules that applicants with diabetes could not be admitted into colleges. At that time, Qingqing considered the vocational high school, but her classmates who knew nothing about her illness said, "you have good scores, why not go to college?" Of course, Qingqing wanted to go to college, so she decided to pick a high school. On the health declaration form for the college entrance examination, she wrote "No" in the column of "past history of illness".

Qingqing said she was definitely not the only diabetes patient in college. During the week of military training, she was lucky to be told how to solve the "problem" by a junior who had

been a wardmate of Qingqing in Beijing Children's Hospital. "She told me to choose the upper berth in the corner of the room and get up at 4:30 to inject insulin." Qingqing said, and as the canteen did not offer her the dietary requirements she needed, she had to buy herself proper food from a store in the barracks every day."

Current Situation: Not a Single Diabetes Patient in Tens of Thousands of College Applicants

The current health examination for college entrance doesn't measure the blood glucose level but does require the filling in of a form giving details of previous medical history. In recent years, all applicants from the Dongcheng district have health examinations in Beijing No.6 hospital. Wang Jianning, the vice principal in charge of the checkup, said that not a single applicant conceded he or she had diabetes out of 8,400 students this year, a pattern repeated over the last few years. In fact, the latest epidemic survey of 20,000 children and adolescents aging from 6 to 18 in Beijing shows that the morbidity rate of diabetes is over 1/1000. According to this rate, out of 8,400 college applicants there should be about 9 diabetes patients. Why did they hide the truth? The doctor said it was obvious that if they conceded, there would be no opportunity for them to be matriculated into universities.

To prove this point, our journalists called recruitment offices of several universities to ask whether students with diabetes can apply for colleges. The answer was always "No". The officers said, "It is not the school that sets the hurdles, but the senior administrating office."

Cause: Recruitment Health Examination Sets the Hurdle

According to the *instructions on Health examination for the recruitment of Colleges and Universities* (to be abbreviated as the *Instructions* in the following text) authorized by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Health and the State Disability Association, the universities have the right to refuse students with serious diseases of the blood, endocrine and metabolic or immune system. Unfortunately, diabetes falls into the group of endocrine and metabolic system.

Prof. Wang Zhili, returning from England and now the principal of the Beijing Chaoyang Diabetes Hospital, felt it was inconceivable when reading the *Instructions*. He said this regulation was neither scientific nor rigorous, and there was no such rule abroad. Eventually he said it was actually a form of discrimination. Professor Yan Chun, an experienced expert of endocrine science in the Beijing Children's Hospital, believed that in the *Instructions*, the so-called "serious diseases of blood, endocrine and metabolic or immune system" were too vague to be defined. He gave an example: the sexual infantilism of a boy should be classified as a serious disease, however it would not affect normal life in university at all. Several years ago she had written in vain to the related competent authorities to illustrate her opinion. She said these children were suffering both physically and mentally.

Opinion: Teenagers with Diabetes Should be Allowed to Enter College

In Prof. Wang Zhili's opinion, currently the number of the children with diabetes in China is increasing due to the improvement of living standards and the change of life style. To deal with it, we should, on one hand, prevent. On the other hand, it is not children's fault if they do have diabetes and school should certainly not abandon them. Furthermore, by taking medicine or timely insulin injections, they can live and study in a normal way on campus. In his opinion, the few conditions not suitable for diabetics are universities that make special demands on the body, such as military universities.

All the schools are attaching great importance to the safety of the students. The school might worry that kids with diabetes would have ketoacidosis or hypoglycaemia because these complications can be fatal. However, Wang Rui, a nurse in the endocrine department of the Beijing Children's Hospital, said that the children with diabetes, especially those with type I diabetes, can judge their condition well because since childhood they have been taught about their diseases by doctors and nurses. In addition to the capability of injecting insulin by themselves, they always have candy or cola to carry about with them, so when the acute complication attacks, they can deal with it effectively. When it comes to type II diabetes, there are more ways of prevention and therapy. So diabetes is not so terrible. Qingqing said that one of her wardmates had become a competent kickboxing tutor and a swimmer in a club.

Worries: Potential Risk of Hiding the Truth of Illness and of Inadequate Medicine Storage Facilities.

No one knows exactly how many teenagers with diabetes are in the universities. It's a disadvantage for them to have to hide the truth of their illness. Everyday they have to inject insulin or take medication, according to their different types of diabetes, namely "type I" or "type II". However, they have to do this secretly, just like Qingqing. Professor Wang said that it might aggravate their health condition because the tension would increase mental stress on them which in turn would increase the level of their blood glucose.

Moreover, the storing of insulin is another problem. Insulin should be well refrigerated. However, Qingqing has no place but the cabinet in her dormitory to keep it. Some experts suggest that the schools should help them to store insulin, for example, allow them to preserve insulin in the refrigerator of the school infirmary where it would be safer and more convenient for the students to inject the medicine. At the same time, the medical garbage such as syringes can be disposed of in line with sanitary requirements.

Background Information

On November 6th, Zhang Xuemei, a journalist from the *Beijing Evening newspaper*, published an article entitled “Should Colleges Open the Door to Teenagers with Diabetes?” in the *Today’s Focus* section challenging the regulations which mean that “students with diabetes are not allowed to go to university”. Once published, the article garnered a lot of attention, and was reprinted on a number of major websites.

At the same time, Wang Yang, a student in the Shandong University of Traditional Chinese Medical Science, was forced to leave school on December 23rd because he was diabetic. CCTV and Shandong TV reported this in depth and some Internet media also made comments on it. Meanwhile, the discussion caught the attention of a person in authority. In March 2008, Professor Wang Zhili, the president of the Beijing Chaoyang Diabetes Hospital, who is also a member of the CPPCC, handed over a proposal to oppose the rule “universities have the right to refuse students with diseases of the blood, endocrine and metabolic or immune system” stipulated in the *Instructions* while attending the CPPCC and People’s Congress. According to Wang Zhili, with the development of health care conditions, diabetes can be easily controlled by injecting insulin. He also pointed out that the *Instructions* harmed students both physically and mentally, so it should be revised. Now his suggestion is under discussion and has won a lot of support from society.

At the same time, the leader of the Shandong University of Traditional Chinese Medical Science decided not to revoke Wang Yang’s status in the university, but to transfer him to the Economics Department of Huazhong University of Science and Technology which is in his hometown. By reporting the news, maybe Zhang Xuemei was not supposed to push forward a reform of an unreasonable rule. However, she did just that. What she changed is not just the fate of Wang Yang but also the fates of all diabetic students!