
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**Detention of citizen journalists who reported on the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan**Joel Keep¹ and David Heslop¹¹ School of Population Health, University New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

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Dear Editor,

We write with concern regarding the arbitrary detention of journalists and clinicians who bore witness to the first months of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan, China. In particular, we wish to draw attention to the plight of 39-year-old lawyer Zhang Zhan (张展), who was detained on 15 May 2020, and who has remained in prison for almost 3 years (1).

Ms. Zhang was one of several citizen journalists who attempted to report on the outbreak in Wuhan, among them videographer Li Zehua (李泽华), lawyer Chen Qiushi (陈秋实) and local resident Fang Bin (方斌), all of whom were subsequently held in custody (2, 3). While Li Zehua and Chen Qiushi appear to have been released after lengthy detentions, Fang Bin was last known to be held in a detention facility in Wuhan (4). Zhang Zhan remains in prison after being charged with “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”, for which she was sentenced to a four-year jail term (5).

Ms. Zhang, who was 36 at the time of her arrest, had come to Wuhan from Shanghai on 1 February 2020, hoping to obtain information on the outbreak of the disease that would come to be known as COVID-19 (6). The video footage Ms. Zhang filmed showed the rising extent of morbidity and mortality in Wuhan at a time when government officials were attempting to impose a regime of censorship on the unfolding epidemic (7). For much of her imprisonment, Zhang Zhan has been in poor health, with family members claiming she had been tortured and force-fed via a nasal-gastric tube after going on hunger strike (8). The detention of citizen journalists and others who attempted to communicate information on the emergence of COVID-19 occurred as central Chinese authorities sought to suppress both public and private discussion of the new disease (9). Several clinicians working in Wuhan, among them the ophthalmologist Dr. Li Wenliang (李文亮), were detained and reprimanded after discussing the outbreak on a private messaging app (10). Dr. Ai Fen

(艾芬), head of the Emergency Department of Wuhan Central Hospital, was reprimanded for seeking to confirm pathology results that indicated patients were infected with an as-yet unidentified coronavirus (11). Dr Li Wenliang later died after being infected with the new virus while attending to an asymptomatic patient (12). His Weibo profile has since become a digital site of pilgrimage for millions of Chinese seeking to memorialise the pandemic (13).

The persecution of clinicians and journalists who attempted to communicate information in the first months of the COVID-19 epidemic in Wuhan recalls the similar plight of those who sought transparency on the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) 17 years earlier. This year, 2023, saw the passing of Jiang Yanyong (蒋彦永), a military doctor and career officer of the People's Liberation Army who exposed the extent of the SARS outbreak amid widespread government censorship (14). In April 2003, Jiang alerted international media to the fact that hundreds of SARS cases were being concealed by central authorities (15). In subsequent years, Jiang was subjected to periods of arbitrary detention, house arrest and “re-education” (16). In early 2020, as COVID-19 emerged, Jiang was again detained and held under house arrest, where he was prevented from speaking to any independent media until his death at the age of 91 (16).

Officials from the World Health Organization first learned of an outbreak of “viral pneumonia of unknown cause” in Wuhan on December 31st, 2019, via Pro-MED mail, a publication of the International Society for Infectious Diseases (17, 18, 19). The previous day, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission had issued an order prohibiting all public communication in relation to the outbreak, which was subsequently leaked online (20). Journalists at the news outlet *Sina Finance* then asked local officials to confirm the authenticity of the leaked document, resulting in media reports (21, 22) that were translated and further disseminated by Pro-MED (17). It was these channels, rather than any official communication from central authorities in Beijing, that first alerted international health authorities to the

outbreak (19, 23).

In 2005, two years after the SARS epidemic began, the WHO revised its International Health Regulations (IHR). The updated IHR created a legally binding framework under which member states of the WHO must report detection of potential public health emergencies of international concern within 24 hours (24). As described above, independent news reporters and non-government disease surveillance played a critical role in alerting the international community to the advent of COVID-19. This is a reminder of the value of freedom of expression, both as an ethical

concern and a practical tool for promoting global health security. Rather than being prosecuted, those who sought a clearer picture of the early months of the Wuhan epidemic should be properly commended.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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