

Lu Feiran

Navigating the hospital system can be trying at the best of times, and it often isn't the best of times for people who are ill and need medical treatment.

A couple from the city of Taizhou in neighboring Zhejiang Province found themselves in that frustrating situation when they came seeking help in Shanghai for the husband's ailing lungs. They didn't know how to get through the registration process, and their out-of-town accents didn't help.

Enter Jane Jiang, 61, a professional "medical companion." She was putting the finishing touches on birthday party plans when the call came. The couple's daughter had booked Jiang's services online, so she dropped everything and drove to the hospital.

Jiang is well versed in helping people through the medical system, from making online doctor's appointments to accompanying patients to medical exams and fetching medicines for them from hospital pharmacies.

The service costs 500 yuan (US\$69) to 600 yuan a day.

The job of "medical companion" is not officially registered in China's occupational catalogues, but the practitioner numbers are rapidly growing.

"The market is much larger than you'd expect," Jiang said. "Most of our clients are from other provinces, but local

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Professional "medical companion"

clients are increasing as well."

The latest national population census showed that about 5.8 million people, or 23 percent of Shanghai's population, are 69 years or older. More than 310,000 of them live alone. They are a high-risk group for medical needs.

In addition, more than 370,000 people from other provinces come to the city every year for medical care, according to data released in 2018.

A surprising number of young people also need some assistance.

Liang Hui, 28, a Shanghai resident who hails from inland Jiangxi Province, was frustrated that she had no one to accompany her to the hospital for a gastrointestinal endoscopic procedure that entails anesthesia.

Liang paid 300 yuan for a half-day of service from a medical companion, who met her at the hospital, fetched the examination report for her and looked after her in the recovery room. After making sure that

Liang was able to walk on her own, the companion drove her home.

"I needed someone to go with me, but I didn't want to ask colleagues for help with what is a private issue," she said. "I feel fortunate that medical companions are available."

In the absence of regulations, medical companions set their own rates and service protocols. They usually promote themselves through social networking sites.

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Most medical companions are between 30 and 50 years of age. Some, like Jiang, have backgrounds in medical work. She was a head nurse.

When newcomers join the ranks, Jiang trains them before giving them any assignments.

"We prefer that newcomers have some basic medical knowledge," Jiang said. "For example,

they need to know how patients should be prepared for some exams and procedures, such as fasting beforehand."

Communication skills are also essential.

"Tenderness and patience are important for a medical companion," Jiang said. "People are not usually happy to be going to a hospital, so we need to put ourselves in their shoes and understand their anxieties."

Her own empathy is rooted in her own experience. Jiang's mother was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer when she retired. The last year of her mother's life was a nightmare.

"Cancer is not only destructive to health; it's also detrimental to mental health," she said. "In my mother's case, the whole family was plunged into gloom."

After her mother's death, Jiang said she felt lost. Her friends encouraged her to find something positive to distract herself. Her new career as a medical companion did the trick.

Jiang said she hopes authorities will eventually recognize her profession and develop regulations and guidelines.

"Without proper management, this service sector could become disorderly," she said.

Another medical companion, who preferred to be called only Yang, agreed.

The 34-year-old was working in construction materials until the business flagged earlier this year because of COVID lockdowns. So Yang quit and

chose to become a medical companion.

The biggest hurdle he now faces is establishing trust with clients.

"There is no certificate or any official institution involved," he said, "so it's natural that people are suspicious."

Last week, he accompanied an elderly woman who came to Shanghai for the first time for medical treatment. Before going to the hospital, he took her on a quick tour of the Bund just to establish a sense of trust.

Government authorities are aware of the need for medical companions. In May 2020, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security announced a new group of niche jobs, including one titled "community health assistant." Its job description is very similar to "medical companions" — providing services such as accompanying people to hospitals and helping them manage their healthcare data.

But two years on, little is heard of "community health assistants."

The concept has various incarnations. At Shibe Hospital in Jing'an District, a team of more than 190 volunteers has been on deck for more than 10 years to help local patients navigate the medical care system.

"We want people to get vital service when they need it, whether it comes from the public or private sector," Yang said. "I think that's how a market like this will operate best."



A successful medical companion needs to be emphatic and patient in dealing with clients often in stress. — Lu Feiran



Volunteers at Shibe Hospital in Jing'an District comfort an elderly patient before surgery. — Ti Gong