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### **Palliative Care for the Children's Oncology Program**

Cancer is currently ranked among the top three causes of death in children. It is estimated that there are 32,000 new paediatric cancer patients diagnosed each year in China, with 40 per cent of children with cancer that will progress to the terminal stage. Uncertainty regarding their disease, ensuing emotional stress and physical discomfort severely impact the psychological well-being of these children and their families, and also negatively impact treatment compliance, confidence in self-care and empowerment of the individual and family. In addition to psychological support, children with terminal cancer need palliative care. Support for these children and there is essential. Unfortunately palliative care for children in China is a new concept and suitable services are not often available for the children and their families in paediatric care facilities.

To address this, Project HOPE has been able to carry out palliative care training and related clinical support programme with generous support from Virgin Atlantic Airways in 2007.

Virgin Atlantic's Change for Children Appeal contributed a total of £66,000 between the months of February and March 2007 to the running of Project HOPE's Shanghai Children's Medical Centre.

Project HOPE is helping Shanghai Children's Medical Centre in several aspects, particularly in heart and cancer diseases. Built 10 years ago, SCMC is now the no. 1 children's hospital in the world for heart defects, currently performing around 2,000 operations a year and scheduled to rise to 3,500 by next year (by comparison, Great Ormond Street performs 350 per year). It is also now the top hospital for children's blood cancer and blood diseases, recognised throughout the world for its high quality. In spite of the success, the hospital's facilities and capacities are still too limited to accommodate demand, especially with some 80% of families coming from China's countryside who are not able to afford the huge cost of care.

Virgin Atlantic's charitable contribution is also being used by the team at the Shanghai Children's Medical Centre to provide palliative care training to care providers for up to 4,000 children (in the first year) who have been diagnosed with terminal cancer. This initiative saves the children from multiple injections of treatment to an in-line catheter. These funds will also provide counselling and support services for the families and carers of those terminally ill children, helping them to make the final period of their children's lives as comfortable and happy as possible.

Although Shanghai Children's Medical Centre is a very unique facility and provides first class treatment for these very sick children, the support of Virgin Atlantic's Change for Children Appeal is also helping to develop new ways of caring for young patients and setting trends to influence paediatric hospitals throughout China.

SCMC is also hoping to create a family environment in the Oncology unit to provide privacy for the children and their families, which is hoped will enhance the lives of those children whose treatment has failed.

Lily Hsu, SCMC's programme director, commented: "Virgin Atlantic's tremendous contribution is not only giving money but also an encouragement. We are deeply grateful."

Through this funding, SCMC and Project HOPE to train health professionals to better recognise and address children's needs and provide parents and caretakers with the skills to support their children during the terminal phases of their illness.

The Strategic Objectives of this project are:

- To enhance professional health knowledge through SCMC and recognition of its importance in providing palliative care for children with cancer and their families.
- To identify strategies and barriers for establishing palliative care
- To control the symptoms of the diseases
- To provide an opportunity for children with cancer and their families to participate in reunion activities thus providing hope and emotional support for children and their families which encourages them to follow and lifts their spirits during the difficult times.

All these activities were initiated in 2007 and are now making good progress. The palliative care program will give public recognition to the importance of providing comfortable care for children with cancer or incurable diseases and their families.

Through professional training, health care providers will realise that when death is inevitable, we need to help the child suffer less. The palliative care program will significantly enhance nationwide acceptance and implementation of palliative care in children. The efforts to establish the concept of palliative care will definitely allow the patients and their families to receive suitable care, and the discomfort syndrome will be attended to by a suitable method of symptom management. Children and their families will be encouraged to express their emotions and feelings regarding the impending death of the child; health care workers will establish an environment that encourages open communication between themselves and children and parents regarding the outcomes of the treatment.