

Dying TO MINE GOLD



Miner He Quangui is ready to die. Often hit by coughing fits and breathlessness, he is one of hundreds of thousands in China who have contracted silicosis from working in the country's gold, coal or silver mines. And there is no safe cure.



Mr He, 39, who was diagnosed with silicosis eight years ago, looking at an X-ray of his lungs (above). He does not have enough money for a lung transplant – the only cure, but one which comes with possible complications – as he and his wife (top) are struggling to make a living with their fruit stall business to put their 16-year-old son through high school. PHOTOS: SIM CHI YIN

By SIM CHI YIN
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

HONGJUN (Shaanxi): A coffin sits in a corner of Mr He Quangui's spartan earthen house, waiting for his certain death.

He has kept it stubbornly shrouded, allowing it to collect a coat of dust.

These days, however, hacking coughing fits remind the former gold miner of his mortality.

It has been eight years since Mr He was diagnosed with silicosis, China's No.1 occupational disease, in which a worker's lungs are gradually overwhelmed by the silica dust he breathes in over the years as he works in gold, coal or silver mines, or stone-cutting factories.

Mr He is typical among the growing number of Chinese workers dying from the disease: Barely out of his 30s, a sole breadwinner and a migrant worker from poverty-stricken, remote mountainous areas, and facing an uphill trek seeking treatment with little money and paltry – if any – employment paperwork.

In his village and the adjacent one, Mr He, 39, knows more than 100 silicosis sufferers, most of whom – like him – saw working in the gold mines of the neighbouring Henan province as a good way to earn money to raise their families.

However, their fatal condition has not deterred others from following in their footsteps just yet.

“Those not sick yet continue to work in the gold mines. And more young people from our village still head out there to work,” said Mr He, who had been a gold miner for six years before falling ill.

“As long as they have not become sick, they feel the disease won't befall them. And then when they find out they are ill, it is too late. Like us.”

There is no cure for silicosis, which starts to sicken workers up to 10 to 15 years after they first work in silica dust-filled mines.

In its crystalline form, silica inflames the lining of the lungs. Over time, this inflammation causes the lung tissue to irreversibly thicken and scar, a condition known as fibrosis.

When that happens, the lungs cannot supply enough oxygen to the blood, resulting in shortness of breath, coughing and tightness in the chest. This leaves the sufferer more vulnerable to lung infections and tuberculosis.

For a disease as deadly as this, safety methods – such as using water when drilling, better ventilation and good face masks – seem reasonable enough, but were just not practised in mines like the ones Mr He had worked in.

Even as China's health-care system improves and lifestyle-related conditions like diabetes and cancer overtake infectious diseases as top killers, silicosis cases – which were common in Great Depression-era United States – have not gone down as expected, but have instead increased in recent years.

The number of workers across all industries who got lung diseases through inhaling dust rose by 14,495 in 2009, up from 10,829 new cases the previous year, according to China's Ministry of Health.

About half of the 650,000 victims recorded since the 1950s are coal miners who drove the country's industrialisation.

No data specifically on gold miners like Mr He is available.

Yet, gold miners typically contract the disease much quicker than those in coal and other types of mines. Silicosis also shows up much more quickly in gold miners, meaning they fall ill at a younger age than others, and the disease progresses more quickly.

“The dust in a gold mine is just more toxic. A young gold miner I met had been at his job for merely six months, and he already had late-stage silicosis. A coal miner with a similar condition might have been exposed to dust for 10 years,” said Dr Chen Gang, director of the government-run Rehabilitation Centre for Pneumoconiosis, the country's top silicosis treatment facility located in Beidaihe, north-east China.

Tough to get compensation

THE mines Mr He and six others interviewed had worked in were all small, private ones which had been sub-contracted to multiple middlemen and operators, making it much harder for them to seek compensation from their employer.

Even as China overtook South Africa as the world's largest gold producer in 2007, its gold mining industry is still very much seen as something of a Wild West territory, where anything goes.

With a growing global appetite for gold – bought by investors as a refuge from the ongoing economic uncertainty in the world – and higher production demands, the tightening of safety controls is unlikely to be mine operators' priority, labour activists said.

China's labour laws state that the employer must pay for treatment of workers injured on the job. But most of the ill miners often have no formal contracts or in-

who is responsible when a breach of the law has taken place. And it is not clear on who will monitor breaches of the law... These issues also don't look like they are being addressed in the latest revision of the law, so it will be very difficult to achieve the stated aim of preventing occupational diseases.”

But Mr Crothall said: “One avenue the workers do have is to sue the local government in whose jurisdiction the mines are located. The local government health department, for example, should ensure that health and safety standards are enforced at the mine.”

Desperate for a cure

THAT feels far beyond the reach of the sick workers in Mr He's village, though. They are preoccupied with their elusive search for ways to make themselves better, exchanging notes on the latest medicines a colleague has been taking, or borrowing money to buy unproven Chinese medicine advertised on television.

They hope against hope for miracles, trapped in a daily routine of coughing fits, sleepless nights and repeated bouts of influenza.

Wheezing badly, former gold miner Wang Yiyin, 48, told this reporter: “It would be better if I died. I can't work. I have no income. I take medicine, but I don't get any better.”

And then he asked: “In your country, there is a cure, right?”

Said Ms Wang Quanmei, 28: “This is like a death sentence, one that takes a while to be carried out.”

Her boyish-looking husband Li Shanchi, 32, was diagnosed with silicosis in 2006 but kept working in the gold mines until this year, when he became too breathless to do even simple tasks.

Treatment to slow the progress of the disease is available, including a lung lavage, or what is known colloquially as “lung washing”, an operation in which doctors fill the lung with a salt solution and then drain it to clear material from the air spaces.

But most late-stage silicosis patients

like Mr He are typically too ill or too deeply in debt to afford “lung washing”.

A rare few who can afford it get a lung transplant. That is the only cure, though not without other possible complications such as infections.

“I dream of winning the lottery and getting a lung transplant,” Mr He said, only half in jest. He is now struggling with his fruit stall business in a nearby town with his wife to put their 16-year-old son through high school.

“You don't know, but some silicosis patients don't actually die from the disease. They kill themselves because they cannot take it any more,” he said during a long interview a day earlier.

He admitted having the same intent.

“I had bought strong rat poison and pesticide... don't tell my wife. I could not do it,” said Mr He, who pants after walking just a few steps.

But a few months ago, he had talked to her about jumping into the river that flows just behind their shop, said Ms Mi Shixiu, 33, who hands her husband warm water to drink and taps him on the back whenever he coughs.

“I told him as long as he is there when I get home and when I leave the house, just to talk to me a little, I am more than happy. I don't need anything more,” she said, sobbing.

“When we are able to forget this illness, we are so happy just being together,” said Mr He, who spoke repeatedly about the deep love they share. He had felt drawn to her after a chance meeting on a bus while they were both out in the fields in a neighbouring province as migrant workers. He then ditched the woman he was already match-made to and instead married Ms Mi, then 16.

“I have hung on with this illness for eight years. I feel very tired, but the main reason I have hung on is my wife's love and care for me. I feel so sorry that I won't be around much longer to repay her love...”

All the other villagers diagnosed with the disease around the same time as Mr He have already died.

“I have watched them die, one by one. And I know one day, it will happen to me,” he said.

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Additional reporting by Carol Feng in Beijing



Mr He looking at the coffin he has made for himself. All the other villagers diagnosed with the disease around the same time as him have already died.