Dr Li Wenliang: Wuhan “Whistleblower” and Early COVID-19 Victim

David P. Steensma, MD, and Robert A. Kyle, MD

Li Wenliang (李文亮), MD, was an ophthalmologist in Wuhan, China, who warned several of his colleagues about the appearance of a new SARS-like virus in December 2019, at the very beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Initially reprimanded by a hospital administrator and formally admonished by the local authorities in Wuhan, he was later exonerated by the Supreme People’s Court of the People’s Republic of China and, after his untimely death, honored by the central government of China as a “martyr” — one of the highest honors given to a private citizen in China.

Dr Li was born in the city of Beizhen, Liaoning province, in northeast China on October 12, 1986. His family is of the Manchu ethnic minority, a group that gave their name to the geographical region of Manchuria; about 10.5 million people of Manchu descent currently live in China. He was an only child and his parents worked for state-run enterprises. In 2004, he graduated from Beizhen High School and was admitted to the Wuhan University School of Medicine, where he completed a 7-year combined undergraduate and medical degree. He chose ophthalmology as a specialty and served for 3 years at the Xiamen Eye Clinic in Xiamen University in the Fujian province in southeast China. In 2014, he joined the staff of the Central Hospital of Wuhan in Hubei province in central China.

On December 30, 2019, the local Wuhan/Hubei Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a warning about cases of a mysterious new form of pneumonia. That same day, a Beijing laboratory identified a coronavirus in bronchoalveolar lavage fluid from a patient in Wuhan, and Dr Li became aware of a chest X-ray from a patient admitted to his hospital in which a SARS-like virus was included in the differential diagnosis. He shared this information with a few fellow physicians in a private “WeChat” thread, warning them to keep their families safe, and he included a screenshot of a patient’s diagnostic report.

Despite Dr Li’s request that his friends keep this information confidential, someone leaked the chat and this alarming news was quickly disseminated throughout China on the Internet. The Chinese CDC notified the World Health Organization of the new illness outbreak the following day. In January 2020, cases of what was now called COVID-19 were first reported in several other countries, including the United States.

On January 3, 2020, Dr Li was summoned by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau and admonished by the police there for “rumor-mongering” and for “publishing untrue statements.” He was threatened with prosecution if he were to persist in this
behavior and received a formal letter of admonition, which he later published on his personal blog on the Sina Weibo microblogging website.

On January 8, 2020, Dr Li developed a fever and was diagnosed with pneumonia. The previous day he had evaluated a patient with acute angle-closure glaucoma; this patient, a trader in the Wuhan seafood and animal market where several of the first novel respiratory illness cases had been described. This patient reportedly had no respiratory symptoms at the time of evaluation but was subsequently diagnosed with COVID-19. Dr Li booked a hotel room to avoid exposing his family to the contagious illness. Despite this, his parents became infected, but they subsequently recovered.

Dr Li was admitted to the hospital at the end of January 2020. Once a nucleic acid-based diagnostic test became available for SARS-CoV2, he tested positive for this novel coronavirus. Unfortunately, his clinical condition deteriorated and in early February he was admitted to the intensive care unit, intubated and ventilated, and later started on extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) for refractory hypoxia. His final hours were followed virtually by tens of millions of people. When he died on February 7, 2020, at the age of 33, he left behind a pregnant wife and a young son.

One of his final online posts before becoming ill was a complaint about the high cost of prenatal vitamins.

In early February 2020, the Chinese Supreme Court issued a statement that Dr Li and others who had been admonished by the Wuhan authorities in the previous month for “rumor-mongering” should not have been reprimanded. On a social media site, the Court issued a statement that included the following warning (English translation as reported in the media at the time): “It might have been a fortunate thing if the public had believed the ‘rumors’ then and started to wear masks and carry out sanitation measures and avoided the wild animal market.” Subsequently, Fortune magazine named Dr Li first in an article entitled, “World’s 25 Greatest Heroes of the Pandemic,” the WHO noted his death in a statement, and Italian author Francesca Cavallo wrote a children’s book entitled “Dr. Li and the Crown-Wearing Virus,” featuring Dr Li’s story.

Dr Li was honored philately by the Republic of Djibouti in 2020, including a stamp with an image of the young physician with a surgical mask on (Figure) and another without a mask.

Since 2016, a publisher in Lithuania has been producing stamps on behalf of Djibouti, many rapidly designed and featuring topics of little relevance to the East African country and with no intention for use as postage. Some philatelic commentators consider these stamps to be “philatelic wallpaper” and of questionable validity, but many recent Djibouti stamps — including the coronavirus commemorative issue that featured Dr Li — have been catalogued by major philatelic catalogues. In the Scott catalogue, the COVID series that featured Dr Li is numbered as Djibouti #2001-2005. Yvert & Tellier’s catalogue lists the block of 4 with the unmasked Dr. Li as #2928-2931, and the masked sheet depicted in the Figure as #555; Michiel catalogue designates the sheet as #3372.

POTENTIAL COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors report no competing interests.