

# Meeting of the minds

*Vancouver  
'healer-warrior' part  
of group to gain  
medical insight  
from trip to China*



**Eastern influences:**  
Vancouver's  
Karl La  
Roue  
shares his  
impressions  
from a recent  
fact-finding  
trip to China.

DAVE OLSON/The Columbian



# China

*Some health care workers willing to discuss social issues*

From page D1

"The patients seemed to be highly controlled at times, performing in structured activities such as exercise and craftmaking," La Rowe said. "They do use a number of the same kinds of medication that we use, especially when it comes to major illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorders."

La Rowe and other delegates found themselves wishing they could engage in more one-on-one discussions with Chinese health care providers, but contact between the groups was limited in time and scope. The Americans visited a hospital holding members of the Falun Gong, a spiritual movement banned by the Chinese government, but La Rowe said the visitors had no access to the sect's members.

The American delegation toured eight treatment centers in three cities — Beijing, Xi'an and Guiyang. La Rowe noticed the farther his group traveled from the nation's capital, the more interested younger psychiatrists and medical students seemed in what La Rowe referred to as "forbidden" topics such as sexual abuse and homosexuality.

"The first hospitals (in Beijing) were rather stiff, with four hours of straightforward meetings and no interest to talk or communicate afterward," La Rowe said. "But in Guiyang particularly, we probably could have talked with them all day ... in one of the last meetings, one of the young doctors rushed onto our bus with his e-mail address."

In settings where doctors and other health care workers were more eager to speak with their American counterparts, social issues were discussed as contributing factors to mental illness. La

Rowe said the Chinese are alarmed at a growing "information gap" between the younger and older generations.

"There are questions as to whether family traditions, family values are breaking down under the introduction of Western technology, especially the Internet," he said.

Such concerns also were noted by the American delegation's leader, Barry Kast, administrator for the Oregon state Mental Health and Developmental Disability Services Division in Salem. He said he was surprised to find that Chinese mental health specialists were more interested in discussing social addictions than psychoses.

"To me that was very revealing," Kast said. "They're really worried about their society and where it's headed and how their kids fit into that."

Kast said he regarded the trip as a success as far as giving insight to area mental health care providers. But he doesn't believe delegates saw a complete picture.

As the group's leader, Kast was responsible for deciding whom to invite. He said La Rowe was welcomed not only for his perspective on public health services, but also because of "his interest in Eastern martial arts spirituality as a pathway out of psychological quandaries."

It's an interest La Rowe is able to pursue more, thanks to a contract with a national health care group. The group has hired La Rowe to train health care providers nationwide how to protect themselves from the stress of dealing with patients suffering from mental trauma. La Rowe draws on his martial arts training to help promote healing.

Previously, La Rowe worked primarily as a mental health investigator and examiner for five Oregon counties, including the Portland area. The job involves evaluating people to see if their conditions warrant being commit-



**Care center:** While in China, the 50-member delegation visited places such as this mental health center in Xi'an.

By **TRICIA JONES**  
Columbian staff writer

The patient was set up for classic biofeedback — soothing music, instruments to read blood pressure, monitors to help him gauge his degree of relaxation.

He also had tiny needles spiking his skin.

"He was hooked up to acupuncture and biofeedback simultaneously," said Vancouver's Karl La Rowe, who witnessed the man's treatment while on a three-city tour of China in March. "It was a real combination of Eastern and Western."

That cultural union was the reason behind La Rowe's presence in China. He was one of 50 Northwest professionals chosen to foster U.S.-Sino communication. Their mission was to share insights on each country's methods of psychiatric care.

The trip was completed just days before an American spy plane collided with a Chinese fighter jet, creating anger and tension between the two nations.

For La Rowe, a licensed clinical social worker, last month's

journey reinforced an abiding interest in incorporating Asian insights into mental health care. He applies martial arts principles to more traditional counseling, resulting in what he calls healer-warrior techniques.

The trip was both invigorating and frustrating for La Rowe, 45. The delegation was among the first group of Westerners to visit any Chinese psychiatric treatment centers. La Rowe knew from his years of living in Singapore that the latter is fairly advanced in its treatment of the mentally ill, but he had no idea what to expect in China.

What he found were medical centers that seemed a little shabby by Western standards, but impressive for a poverty-ravaged country where many citizens struggle daily for survival.



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**Forbidden city:** China's Great Wall affords a panoramic view of Beijing. La Rowe and other delegates found time for sightseeing on the trip.