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10 Held as Unlicensed Medical Practitioners

By GARRY PIERRE-PIERRE

Ten people who investigators said acted as doctors although they did not have licenses were arrested in Chinatown yesterday in a case that officials say highlights the way immigrant groups are taken advantage of when seeking medical care.

In one case, a woman with no medical license performed scores of abortions at a Chinatown clinic. Others were accused of practicing dentistry, acupuncture or other medical techniques without the appropriate accreditation. One of the phony doctors was accused of sexually assaulting a patient.

Officials said they did not know whether any of the patients had been seriously injured, or whether those arrested -- all but one of whom were immigrants -- had received medical training elsewhere.

While the arrests were concentrated in Chinatown, officials say the problem reaches far beyond the borders of that neighborhood and is common in other immigrant enclaves across the city. Often, such practitioners have medical training in their native countries but have yet to pass more rigorous licensing exams here.

By practicing in immigrant neighborhoods, the false doctors manage to provide affordable if questionable health care to largely poor communities while keeping up their medical training as they try to pass state exams.

No matter what their prior training, they pose a threat to patients, said Attorney General Dennis C. Vacco, who announced the arrests at a news conference in lower Manhattan.

"Their level of training and expertise is irrelevant," Mr. Vacco said. "These people are old-fashioned snake-oil salesmen."

Yesterday's arrests were the result of a two-month inquiry by investigators of the Fifth Precinct, the State Attorney General's office, and the State Education Department, which licenses doctors. The investigation was spurred by complaints from patients and by a series of articles in The Daily News about people in Chinatown falling prey to medical impostors.

Posing as patients, the detectives and investigators taped conversations with the fake doctors, some of whom admitted that they were practicing without licenses.

Those arrested yesterday are Wing Bing Chu, You Go Chen, Dian Cao, Hak Man Die, Yong Xiang Au, Chin Fai Ling, Huang Fang Fend, Lisa Lu, Yong Dian Li and Eugene Schwalben. Two others were still being sought.

Officials said that such deception was not limited to the medical profession; immigrants are often duped by people who pose as lawyers saying they can provide green cards and other legal help.

The authorities say the problem is particularly acute in immigrant areas because many newcomers are reluctant to complain to law enforcement officials. Furthermore, the patients often feel more comfortable being treated by people who speak their language and understand their culture.

Mr. Vacco said that the arrests were part of a wider effort by the state to ferret out unlicensed professionals. Last year, the state Board of Education conducted about 400 investigations of 38 professions, including doctors and lawyers, and arrested five people for practicing medicine without a license.

"This is not the end of the story," said Charles Adams, executive director of the State Education Department's office of professional discipline.

But even as they try to find more unlicensed practitioners, officials admit that getting immigrants to come forward and lodge complaints remains difficult. In many instances, the immigrants view the impostors as beneficent, since doctors are often scarce in poorer communities and the phony practitioners typically charge less than licensed professionals.

Jennifer Farina, a spokeswoman for the district attorney's office, said that the investigation would be widened to determine whether anyone had been injured while receiving care from the unlicensed practitioners.

In its series of articles, The Daily News described several cases in which unlicensed doctors provided shoddy services, misdiagnosed symptoms and prescribed wrong medicine. In one case, Mr. Schwalben examined a pregnant patient and did a sonogram but failed to realize that the fetus was lodged in the Fallopian tube, not in the uterus.

"If any other evidence comes forward, we will certainly look into it," Ms. Farina said. "Right now we don't have any more information on the suspects."

In Chinatown, some people practicing medicine without licenses were trained in Western medicine in their homeland, but once they reached the United States, had difficulty passing the tough medical tests, partly because of language barriers. So they take ads in Chinese-language newspapers proclaiming themselves to be herbalists or acupuncturists, and perform medical techniques that require a state license.

Such bogus doctors are especially popular in Chinatown because many newer Chinese immigrants forgo Western doctors for their everyday aches and pains, instead seeking herbal remedies more familiar to them, residents of the neighborhood say.

"It does not matter if they have a license or not," said Lau Kwok, who lives in Chinatown. "What matters is if they can cure you. They don't need a license to be able to cure people. I stay with herbalist."

Thin Lee, a printer, said: "It's good that they are caught. But at the same time, it's going to be very expensive for people like me to go to a real doctor because I don't have health insurance."

Some licensed doctors and health practitioners in the area welcomed the arrests, saying that in recent years the neighborhood has been flooded with fake doctors performing unauthorized procedures for which they are not trained..

"It is wrong for doctors to practice Western medicine in this country without a medical license because this way they don't have to answer to anybody," said Yun D. Quen, a Chinatown herbalist. "Unlike the Chinese herbal medicine, which is basically a body tonic, which acts slowly, the Western medicine takes its effect right away and it can be dangerous to the patient if the wrong medicine is prescribed."

Photo: Ten people who worked as doctors in Chinatown were taken away in a police van yesterday for practicing medicine without a license. (Chang W. Lee/The New York Times)

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