Brief Introduction of Awardee’s
Research Publication/Study and Future Research Development

Awardee (Dept): Dr He Jingwei Alex, Assistant Professor (APS)
Publication Title: The doctor-patient relationship, defensive medicine and overprescription in Chinese public hospitals: Evidence from a cross-sectional survey in Shenzhen city

A. Briefly introduce your research publication/study for which you have received the prize.

Published in Social Science and Medicine, the leading international journal in health policy, this study has successfully revealed the interesting interaction between the damaged doctor-patient relationship in China and physicians’ distorted behaviors. The author has brilliantly noticed that the notoriously rampant practice of overprescription in Chinese public hospitals is not solely driven by physicians’ profit motives, as conventionally believed, but is also explained by the escalating tension in the relationship between doctors and patients.

The core concept of the study is defensive medicine, a peculiar practice of medical practitioners for the purpose of avoiding malpractice litigations. While many previous studies have found widespread practice of defensive medicine in developed countries such as the US, the UK, Japan and Europe, the literature has not adequately recognized that in a country where medical malpractice lawsuits are rare, physicians’ self-perceived threats from patients may also constitute a major reason for defensive practices. This article defies the traditional notion with the case of a Chinese city and shows that defensive practices in Chinese hospitals are driven not only by hard economic incentives, but also by doctors’ motive of avoiding disputes with patients.

The significant contribution of this article is threefold. First, it is the first study in the English-language literature to empirically prove the practice of defensive medicine in the Chinese health system. Second, it has successfully overcome the methodological difficulties in probing defensive medicine with a smartly-designed survey instrument that is able to provide a minimum estimation of prevalence. Third, it furthers scholarly understanding on the causes of both physicians’ overprescribing behaviors and the worsening doctor-patient relationship.

B. How you used/will use your prize and perhaps its usefulness to your research development?

My recent research agenda is on comparative public hospital reforms in the Greater China region. As the backbone of the health delivery system in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, public hospitals provide the bulk of medical services, especially in inpatient care. All members of the Greater China region have undergone significant reforms in their
respective hospital system in the past three decades, with mixed outcomes observed. Little analytical accounts, however, have been produced as to the policy and political logic underlying the reforms that explain the eventual success/failure. While Mainland China has been grappling with its difficult public hospital reform since 2010, other parts of the region also face daunting challenges stemming from citizens’ rising expectations, ageing population and financial pressure. A comparative study will not only advance scholarly understanding on this critical part of health policy reforms, but also yield useful policy insights for policy-makers. This funding provided by the faculty will enable me to hire research assistants and perform fieldwork trips, in order to achieve my research goals.

C. Expected research outcomes/outputs/impacts arising from this prize.

This research is expected to lead to two publications at referred international journals. The data collected and insights drawn will also serve my book plan.