

New cretins discovered in southern Xinjiang, China

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Prof Chen Zu-Pei was surprised to find several young cretins during a recent field study in July 2006 in Akesu Prefecture of Southern Xinjiang. He identified 16 cretins aged less than 15 years, with the youngest being 3 years old. Responding to his report of severe iodine deficiency in this region, the Chinese Ministry of Health immediately sent a team to confirm the findings and expand the investigation to three counties located in Akesu and Hetian Prefectures.

The team, led by Prof. Sun Dianjun and Prof. Chen Zupei, worked for two weeks and then held a 3-day workshop. Thirty six cretins less than 10 years old were identified (mainly neurological cretins); of these, 14 cases were aged less than 6 years. The cretins were found in villages where mainly non-iodized rock salt is used. In the local primary schools, it was estimated that 10 IQ points were lost (measured by the China Ravens' Test)

and 16% of school children exhibited mild mental retardation (IQ in the range of 50-69).

The MOH decided on the following urgent measures:

- To implement an iodized oil program in the three counties where



endemic cretins were identified. This program is planned to last until iodized salt can be made available.

- To expand the investigation to the entire region of southern Xinjiang. The total population of this region is 8 million living in 5 prefectures, in which there are 3 prefectures with potential new cretins.

- The government of Xinjiang was to hold a Teleconference Advocacy Meeting

- To expand the investigation into the Western areas of China where the coverage of iodized salt is below 70%; these provinces include Tibet, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia, Sichuan, Chongqing and Yunnan. This program will start in early 2007.

- A monitoring plan will be developed for identifying high-risk areas.

- National Training Courses will be organized for health workers in the region on identifying endemic cretinism.