Receiving medical care in China can be fraught with difficulties. With few primary-care physicians in the country, getting care requires traveling to the nearest hospital—most doctors are hospital-based—and standing in line waiting to spend a few minutes with an impersonal physician. Faced with these obstacles, people often triage themselves, gathering advice from friends and family before deciding to see a physician. But for the poor and uninsured, paying for health care may not be possible.

As a premed student at Peking University, Zha found this exclusionary system troubling. She wanted to do something about it but wasn’t sure what would help. She left Beijing to complete a mathematics degree at the University of Nebraska, and it was there that she first learned about student-run free clinics. Fascinated by the concept, she thought this model could be emulated in China as a way of introducing compassion-based medicine and service projects to medical students who were unfamiliar with the concepts of social responsibility and volunteerism.

Inspired, she proposed the project to former colleagues at Peking University, and they discussed the feasibility of creating a free clinic. She knew that deconstructing the traditional Chinese model of care was a risky idea because physician–patient animosity is a longstanding problem. “Patients don’t trust doctors, so why would they trust medical students,” Zha says.

Convincing the government, the medical community, and administrators and faculty at
Peking University’s medical school that the clinic was viable would not be easy. But undaunted by the task, Zha and a small team of volunteers spent a year visiting student-run clinics in the U.S. and negotiating with Chinese bureaucrats and university officials. Their efforts were rewarded—in 2010 the Sunshine and Love Clinic opened with six volunteers, including Zha. Today, nearly 450 student volunteers staff and manage the campus-based clinic, which provides a bridge to care with physical exams, diagnosis of minor ailments, and health profiles for Beijing’s vulnerable poor and their families.

“On average, students spend at least 45 minutes with each patient, examining them and talking with them in a caring and compassionate way,” Zha notes. “This personal touch reassures patients and helps them understand their diagnosis and next steps.”

It’s a good feeling, Zha says, when someone tells you that this is the first time they’ve been treated as a person or asked how they are doing. “Patients want to be heard, and listening to them is the first step to healing,” she believes. “In China, you can go through eight years of medical education without learning how to talk to or interview a patient in depth.”

Zha’s determination to help those less fortunate has gained the attention of medical students throughout China. She coordinated and helped host a national medical student forum in Beijing to teach others what she’s learned, and she has led sessions on volunteerism and social responsibility.

“Geisel has been really supportive of my efforts,” she says. “For the past year, I’ve been able to take time off from my studies to organize and bring medical students from China to the U.S. to attend the annual Society-Run Free Clinics conference.”

Her goal is to create a national model for student-run free clinics in China, and to change health-care policy. “There are 20 affiliated hospitals at Peking University, so we have the capacity to enlarge our scope of care,” she says. “The Sunshine and Love Clinic sees more than 100 patients annually—and that’s one clinic in one hospital.”

Zha knows there’s a long way to go, but she’s off to a good start.