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Medical team draws up plans for astronauts

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Each time Chinese astronauts are launched into space or they return to Earth, almost all of the space industry workers who are involved in the process hope their meticulously honed skills contribute to the success of the mission.

However, a few well-trained professionals always wish that their expertise is never needed. They are doctors and nurses from the Manned Spaceflight Medical Support Team who deal with health emergencies of astronauts.

"Since China's first manned spaceflight — the Shenzhou V in October 2003 — medical specialists from my center have taken part in the on-site medical support work for every crewed mission, and they have done their job very well," said Gu Jianwen, deputy chief of the landing site system and head of the Beijing-headquartered medical support team, in an exclusive interview with China Daily at the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwestern China's Gobi Desert.

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Gu said that nearly 3,000 doctors and nurses from his medical center's departments of neurosurgery, orthopedics, general surgery, cardiovascular medicine, thoracic surgery, respiratory medicine and gastroenterology have provided emergency health assistance to manned spaceflights over the past two decades.

"During the launch phase of every new crew, we are required to be on standby — from 15 minutes before the carrier rocket's liftoff to three minutes after that. When a spacecraft returns to Earth, we are responsible for first checking the physical condition of crew members and then carrying out preliminary medical examinations," said the director, who is also a top neurosurgeon in China.

A team of 15 senior medical personnel, equipped with a full array of first-aid medicines and medical equipment, has been tasked to provide support to the Shenzhou XVI and Shenzhou XVII crew members.

The team has prepared for 29 emergency scenarios that might require medical intervention, including scalds, burns, impact injuries and frostbites, Gu said, adding that it has prepared specific plans and trained hard for each possible situation.

The Shenzhou XVII crew — mission commander Senior Colonel Tang Hongbo, Lieutenant Colonel Tang Shengjie and Lieutenant Colonel Jiang Xinlin — took off from the Jiuquan launch center on Thursday morning and arrived at Tiangong space station later that day.

The Shenzhou XVI astronauts — mission commander Major General Jing Haipeng, Colonel Zhu Yangzhu and Professor Gui Haichao — have completed all their tasks at Tiangong over the past five months and are scheduled to return to Earth on Tuesday.

"Considering the fact that there are forests and water bodies near the Dongfeng Landing Site, our specialists have not only practiced critical medical operations, but have also done intensive physical exercises. They have even learned helicopter-based rapid deployment maneuvers," Gu said. "We are confident and capable of fulfilling our duties and will always provide the best medical services to our astronauts."

Speaking about future missions, the neurosurgeon said his center has started exploratory studies about medical support for China's planned manned expeditions to the moon and crewed adventures that will go deeper into space.

"In the future, when our astronauts fly to the moon and Mars, how will they adapt to the environment there and how will they take care of their nervous, endocrine, metabolic, digestive and other vital systems — these are the questions we are currently focusing on," he added.