

Beijing clinic ministers to online addicts

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"I'm 12 years old," one boy announces with a smile. "I love playing computer games. That's it."

"It's been good to sleep" says another, a 17-year-old with spiky hair, now that he's no longer on the computer all day.

The youths are patients at China's first officially licensed clinic for Internet addiction, a downside of the online frenzy that has accompanied the nation's breathtaking economic boom.

"All the children here have left school because they are playing games or in chat rooms everyday," says the clinic's director, Dr. Tao Ran. "They are suffering from depression, nervousness, fear and unwillingness to interact with others, panic and agitation. They also have sleep disorders, the shakes and numbness in their hands."

According to government figures, China has the world's second-largest online population -- 94 million -- after the United States.

While China promotes Internet use for business and education, government officials also say Internet cafes are eroding public morality. Authorities regularly shut down Internet cafes -- many illegally operated -- in crackdowns that also include huge fines for their operators.

State media has also highlighted cases of obsessed Internet gamers, some of whom have flunked out of school, committed suicide or murder. Nonetheless, Internet cafes continue to thrive, with outlets found in even the smallest and poorest of villages. Most are usually packed late into the night.

A reporter was allowed to talk to patients at the clinic on condition they not be identified by name.

"I wasn't normal," said a 20-year-old man from Beijing who used to spend at least 10 hours a day in front of the screen playing hack-and-slash games like Diablo.

"In school I didn't pay attention when teachers were talking," he said. "All I could do was think about playing the next game. Playing made me happy, I forgot my problems."

The 12-year-old, a new arrival, spent four days in an Internet cafe, barely eating or sleeping.

A soft-spoken 21-year-old man from northeastern Heilongjiang province who had been in the clinic for 10 days said his addiction had helped him escape from family pressures about his studies.

"I would stay up for 24 hours. I would eat only in front of the computer," he said.

Tao's team has put together a standard diagnostic test to determine whether someone is addicted, then uses a combination of therapy sessions, medication, acupuncture and sports like swimming and basketball to ease patients back into normal lives.

They usually stay 10 to 15 days, at \$48 a day -- a high price in China, where the average city dweller's weekly income is just \$20.

The routine begins around 6 a.m. and includes sessions on a machine that stimulates nerve impulses with 30-volt charges to pressure points.

Some patients receive a clear fluid through intravenous drips said to "adjust the unbalanced status of brain secretions," according to one nurse. Officials would not give any other details about the medication.

Patients also nap, write diary entries or play cards. Their rooms are sunny, each decorated with artificial flowers, Winnie the Pooh comforters and a 17-inch television.

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