

Originally published 04:34 a.m., April 2, 2009, updated 03:38 a.m., April 2, 2009

64 infected by hepatitis at hospital in China

ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIJING (AP) - Police have detained the director of a Chinese hospital where at least 64 people were infected with the potentially deadly liver disease hepatitis C after receiving transfusions from blood collected illegally, state media reported.

The infections were discovered in September after a patient who had received a transfusion during an operation tested positive for the disease, the Xinhua News Agency reported Wednesday.

The hospital in the southwestern city of Pingtang traced the transfusion to a donor in another province who had sold as many as 42 pints (20 liters) of blood to the hospital from 1998 to 2002.

Further tests showed that by Tuesday, 64 patients had been infected with hepatitis C through blood transfusions from the donor, who was a hepatitis C carrier, the report said.

Xinhua said director Li Changhe was detained on suspicion of illegally collecting and providing blood.

A woman who answered the phone at the hospital on Thursday said no one was available to comment. Police in Pingtang said they were not authorized to speak to the media and referred questions to the county government, where calls rang unanswered.

Hepatitis C results in the swelling of the liver and can cause stomach pain, fatigue and jaundice. It may eventually result in liver failure. Even when no symptoms occur, the virus can slowly damage the liver.

China's rules on blood collection were tightened following revelations that blood-buying rings were responsible for infecting thousands of people with HIV in rural areas of central China during the mid-1990s.

Last year, China said agents who collect or supply blood that causes at least five people to contract AIDS, hepatitis B, hepatitis C or syphilis, or that leads to severe anemia or organ malfunction, could face 10 years to life in prison.