

## **2. TRADITIONAL MEDICINE**

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### **Introduction**

Traditional medicine has always played an important role in our health care system. More than 40 years ago, more than half of our population relied on traditional medicine for their health problems and only turned to Western Medicine as the last resort.

As Western medicine progresses with more local doctors in practice, more and more people especially the younger population began to seek Western medical practitioners for their health problems instead. Western Medicine became the main source of health care especially in urban areas.

Recently, the vast publicity of herbal cures in the media and other sources has tempted more and more people to try such treatment. The government's effort to stop such unhealthy publicity has not been very successful. Because of this there is a sudden surge of interest in herbal therapy.

Doctors however, cannot ignore the contribution of traditional medicine towards the health care of our country. Whether, we like it or not, a vast part of our population will still seek traditional cures or even more important to us, mix up both types of treatment. Doctors, during his day to day practise will come across situations related to traditional medicine, which they need to deal with and therefore it is to our advantage to have some knowledge of traditional medicine. Persuading our patients not to seek traditional cure is definitely not the answer and will not be successful. We must therefore find ways to be able to complement each other if necessary.

Presently, the attitude towards traditional medicine has changed much throughout the world. The use of traditional medicine is increasing, in some cases quite sharply. Britain spends over forty million pound sterling a year on herbal products. Traditional therapies are applied in public hospitals in China, Japan, Laos, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. In Australia, 48.5% of the population used at least one non-medical prescribed alternative medicine in 1993 and the estimated national expenditure on alternative medicines and practitioners is close to A\$1000 million per annum. In China, traditional medicine accounts for 30-50% of the total medicinal consumption. In Hong Kong, 60% of the population has consulted traditional medical practitioners at one time or another. (1) Undergraduates of Western Medical Schools in China have to attend a six-month course in traditional medicine.

We often deal with traditional medicine in a variety of professional situations. Some of which are:

1. Patients may ask for advice about alternative therapy and which therapist to consult when conventional therapy fails. General knowledge of herbal medicine, its potential and limitation, will be useful in such circumstances.
2. Patient who has just seen a traditional practitioner may want to seek our advice about the diagnosis given by the traditional practitioners. Traditional medicine has different ways of approaching a disease. Often a patient will be told that he has a "heaty" condition. By pushing this aside without a proper explanation to our patient who believes in traditional medicine may cause them to lose confidence in us altogether.
3. If a patient is taking herbal medication, we may be concerned of possible interactions with the medicine we are about to prescribe. By not telling the doctor of this may cause unnecessary risk.

4. Certain herbal preparations especially those bought from overseas may still contain potent Western medicine such as steroids thus causing some side effects. I just came across a herbal product for diabetes bought in China recently that contains glybenclamide.

5. The complaint the doctor has to deal with may in fact be due to the side effects of the herbal medication that the patient has been or is now taking. Some knowledge of herbal medicine may be useful in such situations.

It is therefore important for us doctors to have strategies to cope with such situations. We should also be prepared to approach the problem sensibly with appropriate discussions with patients and possibly the traditional practitioners as well.

### **Traditional Medical Practitioners**

In Malaysia, we have a large number of traditional practitioners. Our three main ethnic groups have their own traditional healers. Each is further divided into different types of practise such as herbal cure, massage, spiritual cure etc. Unfortunately, without control by authorities there are just as many or even more bogus ones in practise. The qualified ones no doubt play an important role in our health care system but the unqualified ones are doing harm instead of good to the community.

At the moment there is hardly any law to govern and control the practise of Traditional Medicine. Unlike doctors, who are governed by MMC, those who practise Complementary Medicine do not have such a body to control them. There is also very little in our existing Medical Acts which can be used to control Traditional Medical practise.

The Ministry of Health has begun to find ways to register traditional practitioners to wean out those unqualified ones. It has taken steps in that regard by asking all the three main traditional practitioner associations namely the Federation of Chinese Physicians and Medicine dealers Association of Malaysia (FCPMDAM), Persekutuan Perubatan Tradisional Melayu Malaysia (PUTRAMAS) and Pertubuhan Persatuan Perubatan Tradisional India Malaysia (PEPTIM) to submit all the names of those who are currently practising traditional medicine. The second phase is to register only the qualified ones. All the associations of Traditional Medical Practitioners have been asked to submit to the government the qualifying criteria for registration. They will draw up their own accreditation standards, code of ethics, training programmes and guidelines. The final list of registered practitioners will be given to the government. The Minister of Health has recently reported that a body similar to MMC will be formed to control the practise of traditional medicine in the country. This hopefully, in future, will see some control of traditional medical practise in our country. New medical acts may be needed to help control the increasing problem of bogus Traditional Medical practises.

Singapore has also made a similar move, according to a recent press report. It stated that the Traditional Chinese Medicine Bill was passed in Parliament recently which will require practitioners of Traditional Medicine in Singapore to be registered in phases by their own professional board from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2002.

In Malaysia, as mentioned earlier, there are three main different ethnic groups of Traditional Medical Practitioners. Of the three, the Chinese Traditional Medical practice is the most abundant and established especially in the urban areas. As far as Chinese medicine is concerned, there are many genuine Chinese Physicians in practise who are either trained overseas or locally and we should respect their role in health care. In Penang alone, there are two schools of Chinese Medicine where candidates undergo formal training both in theory and practical for five years and sit for an exam before being allowed to graduate. One was established in 1954 and conducts 2

minor and 2 major term examinations a year followed by a final examination at the end of the five years training. The candidates can only start practising on his own apparently after a two-year period of practical training.

Unfortunately, there are also many unqualified ones who practise all types of cure. Anyone at the moment can just open a shop and call himself or herself a traditional medical practitioner and in the case of Chinese Traditional Medicine a "Sinseh". It is also unfortunate that the unscrupulous ones seem to be more popular and making lots of money most likely due to their unethical ways of publicising their services.

Traditional Medicine had been used for centuries and efficacy has been tested through time. The logic behind this is that if it were not effective or harmful, it would not have survived the test of time even though there are only limited scientific proof of their efficacy.

However, in order to prevent confusion to the public and improper practises by some Traditional Practitioners, there should be some rules laid out for them to follow.

Some of the objections by Western trained Medical practitioners are:

1. Traditional Medical Practitioners should not carry the title "Dr".
2. Traditional Medical Practitioners should not use Instruments of Western Medicine which they are not trained to use such as the stethoscope which some traditional medical practitioners use just for show and thus mislead the public.
3. Traditional Medical Practitioners should not use the word "Clinic" or "Klinik" on their signboard to avoid confusion.
4. Traditional Medical Practitioners should not perform X-ray, blood and urine tests using Western modern medical technology which they are not trained to interpret.
5. A non-registered medical practitioner cannot issue a medical certificate as stipulated under section 27 and section 28 of the Medical Act 1971.

## **APPENDIX:**

### **Herbal Medicine**

Recently, strict control has been implemented by the Ministry of Health to control the manufacturing of herbal medicine in Malaysia. For a start, Herbal medicine preparations will not be allowed to contain any Western Medicine at all. In the past many herbal preparations contain Western medicine such as Aspirin, Paracetamol, Bisthmus, Sodium Bicarbonate, etc. Herbal medicines on sale in Malaysia have also to undergo strict test to estimate the level of heavy metal. They have to meet the acceptable level provided by the Ministry of Health. This is because many herbal medicines arise from roots and therefore are often contaminated with heavy metals such as lead and mercury. In addition to this, herbal medicine prepared locally must also undergo strict bacteriology testing. A monograph on medicinal plants, which is an official document providing a standard reference pertaining to the quality and safety specifications of selected medicinal plant species, is being prepared by the National Pharmaceutical Control Bureau, Ministry of Health, Malaysia.

It is surprising to read that even in Western Countries, herbal medicine has been widely used and sales are increasing. In Europe and America, more and more people are turning to Traditional Chinese herbs. The trend of Westerners putting more faith and interest in Eastern cultural heritage must have started when Eastern Martial Art was found to be superior and accepted by more and more Westerners. Westerners are now believing that there is something in what the East has to offer and the willingness to accept it. Moreover, after the visit of the President Nixon to China, a lot of interest was shown in Acupuncture.

Chinese herbalism is the most prevalent of ancient herbal traditions currently practised in Britain. (2) Spending on herbal products in UK is over Forty Million Pounds Sterling a year as mentioned earlier. One of the reasons quoted for the success of herbal treatment in UK is the success in the management of chronic debilitating diseases such as eczema, arthritis and asthma.

You can search for scientific information of any Chinese herb at the following Internet site:  
[http://www.china-med.net/herb\\_search.html](http://www.china-med.net/herb_search.html)

WHO has also published a book, which catalogues 150 species of medicinal plants most commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine. The book was compiled in collaboration with the Institute of Chinese Materia Medica. It is also available at WHO book agent in Malaysia. More and more research and trials are on the way for the more common herbs. For example, as reported in the BMJ recently, the dramatic response of some patients' eczema after treatment by Dr. Lao at the London Chinese Medical Centre prompted dermatologists to undertake randomised controlled trials of the herbal treatment. (2) Some medicines used in Western Medicine such as Ephedrine and Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) are from Chinese herbs.

There are a few differences between conventional and herbal medicine:

1. Herbs are usually used in combination (compound formula) to avoid the side effects when a single herb is used alone and in higher dosage. The herbs work synergistically to each other and may even counteract some unwanted side effects. This rule was not followed by the modern user and thus many side effects of herbs become apparent.
2. Only small dose of each herb is used to avoid the side effects of a single herb when used in high concentration.
3. Whole plant containing its entire component is used. The plant contains many different active substances that will work synergistically and often also act as buffer. Little side effects due to toxicity are seen when herbs are used this way.
4. The therapeutic theories of Chinese Traditional Herbs are directed to treat patient's illness according to his or her presenting symptoms and signs. They do not usually have a fixed diagnosis as in modern medicine.
5. Herbalists have different diagnostic principles from conventional practitioners. For example, a laxative or diuretic is often prescribed to treat different illnesses.

Below is an example of a herbal product to illustrate what I discussed above. This compound is often prescribed for treating illness with flu-like symptoms such as mild fever, cough, tightness of chest, tachycardia and fatigue. It has also been used to treat early Pulmonary Tuberculosis.

*The prescription contains:*

1. *Morus alba* leaves
2. *Eriobotrya Japonica* (thunb) leaves
3. *Ginkgo biloba*
4. *Lycium Chinensis*
5. *Platycodon grandiflorum*
6. *Stemona Japonica*
7. *Bupleurum Chinensis*
8. *Glycyrrhiza Uralensis*
9. *Trichosanthes Kirilowii* Maxim

The functions of the herbs are:

- 1,2,3 & 9.....Have anti-inflammatory effects; it helps clear and moisten the lungs
- 5 & 6 .....Ease the cough and expectorate the phlegm
- 4 & 7 .....Anti-pyrexia
- 8 .....Neutralize the unwanted side effects of the above

**Risk in Herbal Medicine:**

There is also a risk in taking herbal medicine, as there is no scientific control of their safety. Patients often assume that the herbal medicine they bought over the counter is genuine or safe. Even the genuine herbal medicine does contain active ingredient and over dosage can cause harm. A herb called *Aristolochia fangchi* was blamed for causing bladder cancer in a recent report from US.

Herbal medicine is now extremely expensive and there is now also financial risk involved as well. Often we hear of terminally ill patients spending all their savings on such herbal medicines, which have not helped them as much as they were led to believe.

Nowadays herbal medicines are often not used according to the traditional method and thus more side effects are encountered. Traditionally they are boiled in a special way and drunk as tea in a diluted form.

***Why do people use traditional medicine when scientific medicine is now freely available?***

People choose alternatives because they believe they need them. Many prefer herbal treatment because they think it is more natural and therefore non-toxic which is not always the case. Some are lead to believe that herbal therapy ensures a cure while conventional medicine only suppresses symptoms.

A survey in the UK on the use of complementary medicine showed that about 80% are satisfied with the traditional medical treatment they have received. (3)

One of the reasons for taking traditional medicine in the past in Malaysia and possibly other Asian countries must be the low cost of seeing a traditional Medical Practitioner and the low cost of herbs at that time. Traditionally, Chinese physicians do not ask for a consultation fee. Rewards are usually given in a form of a red packet containing any amount of cash, which is usually very small. Patients sometimes offer gifts of food as payment. Herbal medicine at that time was also very cheap. It is of course no longer the case now as some of the charges are very high. The average consultation fee charged by a "Sinseh" nowadays is RM15, which is even higher than what some General Practitioners charge. In the October issue of *Statistic Singapore*, it was reported that the annual income of Chinese sinsehs grew twice as fast as that of a doctor.

One of the reasons, some patients prefer to consult traditional practitioners is the time and attention given to them as a whole. Some patients cite the lack of personal attention paid by conventional practitioners as a reason for choosing complementary approach. (3)

One other reason must be the hope of receiving some hope of cure after the patient has tried out Western medicine without success. This is often seen in patients with terminal illnesses such as terminal cancer. It is said that certain herbal preparations increase the quality of life but do not really offer a cure. There is a danger of false hope and further disappointment. Unfortunately, there are some unscrupulous people who make use of this fact to market bogus herbal preparations in an effort to make a quick buck from the vulnerable patients!

Some herbal medicine has undergone extensive trials and has been proven to be beneficial for certain cancer patients. Some, such as *Jian Pi Yi Shen*, were used to help reduce complications from chemotherapy and even radiotherapy. (4)(5) Some are used for their analgesic effect. Some such as *Astragalus* (*huang qi*) are found to have some cytotoxic effect as well. This drug has undergone intensive clinical trial both in China and US and has been proven to have tumour cell killing activity. However, unfortunately, some have been found to cause more harm due to toxicity. This is especially true when herbal medicine are used by those not following the

traditional practise of using low dose small amount and in combination. In Europe, Western trained medical practitioners have tried to use herbal preparations with a single herb and in higher dosage leading to many toxic effects. We doctors should stick to what we know best and not try to use herbal medicine which we know very little of.

In Europe, herbal medicine is often blamed for causing side effects of treatment that contain both traditional and conventional medicine. For example, in Belgium, a slimming cocktail preparation causing renal failure was blamed on the Chinese herb Guan Fang Jin. It was later pointed out that other ingredient in the cocktail such as a Serotonin-Creatinin-Sulphate that is known to have nephrotoxic effect should be blamed instead.

### **Homeopathy**

Homeopathy which is another complementary medicine commonly practised in Malaysia however cannot be considered a Traditional Medicine as it was started by Samuel Christian Hahnemann (1755-1843), a German Physician, only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It spread widely throughout Europe and also reached India, where it is still widely practised. (6) However, this is widely practised in Malaysia and should be governed by the same rules as Traditional Medical Practice mentioned above.

### **Indian Traditional Medicine:**

Indian Traditional medicine is also very ancient in origin. The very early concepts were from the sacred writings called "The Vedas" which dated as far back as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium. This is apparently a rather crude form of Indian Traditional Medicine. The Vedas are rich in magical practises for the treatment of diseases and has charms for the expulsion of demons traditionally supposed to cause diseases. The herbs recommended for various treatments are numerous.

The present system of Indian Traditional Medicine is known as Ayurveda which is based on the teaching of two classics, Charaka Samhita which deals with medicine and Sushruta Samhita which deals with surgery possibly from as early as 800BC.

Knowledge of anatomy in Indian Traditional Medicine was rather limited as Hindus were prohibited by their religion from cutting dead bodies.

Indian therapeutic was largely dietetic and medicinal. Inhalations, leeching, cupping and bleeding were frequently employed.

The Indian materia medica was extensive and consisted mainly of herbs from indigenous plants. Charaka knew 500 medicinal plants and Sushruta knew 760. Some that have been used in Western medicine are Cardamon and Cinnamon.

Surgery was widely used in Indian medicine even in ancient times and many surgical instruments have been adapted and still being used in modern times. Plastic surgery was being performed in ancient times in India also.

The Indian community especially in the estates seemed to express more faith in the Indian Traditional Medical Practitioners (both Ayurvedic & Sinddha) than in Western Medicine. (7) One of the reasons quoted is the cost of seeing a Western doctor. With the sudden increase in costs of herbal medicine, the trend may slowly change. The ability to form a personal relationship with the Indian Traditional Practitioner is also a contributory factor to his popularity. There is a belief that Western Medicine only treat illness symptomatically while Traditional Medicine is curative. There is also a belief that Western Medicine is toxic.

### **Malay Traditional Medicine**

Two main traditional practises namely the healers (bomoh) and the midwives (bidan) are found in the Malay community. They provide useful services especially to the rural population. The bomoh is a healer who is skilled in areas of herbal medicine, bone setting (bomoh patah), sexual therapy, mental illness and various ailments that are attributed to witchcraft and sorcery. Some of these healers also specialise in love potion and charms. (8) The Bidan (village housewives) normally comprise elderly females who are specialists in deliveries and pre- and post-partum care. Unfortunately they are getting rarer by the day. They provide an invaluable service (berjasa) to the government midwife and health authorities, as midwifery services cannot meet the needs of rural Malay women since many houses they go to are remote and inaccessible by road. However, when modern maternal and childcare services are expanded, the services of the village midwives may not be so important. Both the bidan and the bomohs obtain their knowledge and skills by inheriting from their elders and often through prophetic dreams (mimpi).

A survey in 1991 showed that most villages have at least four bomohs specialising in different areas of medicine especially bone-setting, mental illness and sexual therapy. Some use a combination of herbal medicine and Islamic verses to assist them in their treatment. (9)

Malays prefer to regard the bomoh as a family physician, someone they can develop a close personal relationship with and whose judgement could be trusted. In the survey, some of the reasons Malays were still found to consult bomoh were that they were cheaper and found to be effective for certain disease and disorders including skin rashes, insomnia, weight problem, some sexual problem and some mental disorders.

### **Chinese Traditional Medicine:**

The theoretical framework of Chinese Traditional Medicine was established more than 3000 years ago. A great deal of ancient medical knowledge is revised and preserved in the Pre-Chin (221-207BC) Inner Cannon (Nel Ching) which contains a comprehensive record of Chinese medical theories up to that time.

In Western medicine, we often have no explanation for the cause of some diseases. However, Traditional Chinese Medicine often offers a logical explanation to the patients, which often make sense to them and thus ease their minds. In Chinese Traditional Medicine, words like "heaty" and "wind" are often used. This often re-enforces patients own beliefs and expectations. If we try to ignore this, we are often been labeled by our local patients as ignorant. Let me give you an example. A GP saw a patient and the patient asked the doctor if he has "wind" and the "smart" GP answered sarcastically that he is not sure whether it is a southerly or northerly wind! The patient never returned to that doctor again!

Unlike Western Medicine, which focuses on a particular disorder, Traditional Chinese Medicine is a highly developed system, well documented and with its own body of theory. Traditional Chinese Medicine strives to promote an overall balance and harmony within the person and the five basic elements of the earth. All human beings, according to Chinese Traditional Medical theory, were made up of two opposing energy such as Yin & Yang. Much of the theories develop from the search for eternal life. When the body is not in harmony, poor health ensues. Remedies using herbs, certain exercise, massage and procedures such as acupuncture helps to restore and maintain harmony. Often words like "Cold" and "heat" are used to explain any dysfunction.

Western Medicine believes that the body represents one functioning system and the mind the other and each system may effect the other. Thus illnesses can be either physical or mental (functional). However, Chinese Traditional Medicine assumes the body as a whole and each part is intimately connected. In view of an illness, the whole body is important not just the illness. The

surrounding influence such as the weather is just as important. It names six external disease-causing factors (liu yin). Chinese traditional medicine believes that the weather influences the body and excessive change of weather can even harm the body. Prevention of illness taking into consideration of weather is therefore vital to good health. For example, in winter, it is advisable to sleep early and get up late like the rising of the sun in order not to disturb the Yang Qi.

Chinese Traditional Medicine also believes that the body has the potential to heal itself and cures its own diseases if pushed in the correct way such as by using herbs, acupuncture or other means. As mentioned above, even the surrounding conditions such as weather, humidity, etc are important.

Much of the knowledge on Chinese Medicine was lost during the period of the first emperor of united China. The Emperor was very suspicious of scholars and anyone with knowledge for fear of being overthrown. He therefore ordered all books of knowledge, which included medical materials burnt, and scholars were beheaded. There was very little surgical progress as good surgeons were often killed for suspicion of intention to harm the emperors when a surgical intervention was suggested.

In Chinese Traditional Medicine, prevention is more important. In fact wealthy Chinese visit the sinsehs when they are well and pay a retainer. The doctor losses his fee if they become ill. Much of Chinese Traditional Medical theories were developed while seeking Immortality. Chinese physicians preached moderation such as consumption of alcohol. It believes that health can be achieved and disease prevented by promoting the body in a "balanced state". Delicate balance of Yin and Yang is very important to preserve life.

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