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LIFE HEALTH

Get past 'ick' factor for herbal benefits



By Melissa Carr, Special to 24 hours
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A worker prepares traditional Chinese herbal medicines at Beijing's Capital Medical University Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital. (REUTERS)

The British government recently announced it is looking at integrating traditional Chinese medicine into its national health service. A group of experts has been tasked with investigating whether there is sufficient evidence that the herbs involved in TCM are both safe and effective enough to make them available on their national health benefits program, alongside western medicines.

While the practice of acupuncture is regulated in five provinces — British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland — only B.C. also licenses and regulates the herbal practice of TCM under the titles of registered TCM herbalist (R.TCM.H.), registered TCM practitioner (R.TCM.P), and registered doctor of TCM (Dr. TCM).

In the West, acupuncture receives most of the glory and recognition when TCM is considered, but Chinese herbals are an equally important aspect of this long-standing medical system. Just as acupuncture points are selected by considering the whole person, not just the symptoms, so too are herbs. In the West, we often ask questions like, “Which herb can treat headaches?” or “That herb helped my friend’s joint pain. Should I take it?” Research investigates the results of a consistent amount of X given to a group of individuals with Y problem to see how many gain positive results as measured by Z.

The problem is that herbs selected by a TCM professional are chosen based on each individual’s patterns of whole body health and imbalance. Thus, one Crohn’s patient may be given a different combination of herbs than another Crohn’s patient. This causes a real complication when gold standard research is attempted.

Nevertheless, researchers are doing their work, looking for ways to clarify herb effectiveness. The European Journal of Pharmaceutical Sciences published a study by Li et al demonstrating that berberine, a major constituent in the Chinese herbs huang lian, huang bai, huang qin, long dan cao, and ku shen, can help prevent the intestinal wall cellular damage that occurs with inflammation. Another study, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association by Bensoussan et al had 116 patients take either a Chinese herbal formula or placebo over 16 weeks while being evaluated by a TCM herbalist and a gastroenterologist. Those receiving the herbs found significant benefit.

Though our sweet and salty-seeking taste buds are unaccustomed to bitter flavours, getting past the “ick factor” of the taste of Chinese herbs — especially if you are dealing with digestive, skin, or immune system imbalances — may be worth the effort.

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