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Edited by Suzanne Harrison suza

Traditional Chinese medicine is now being sought out as a preventative measure by those who used to see it only as a last resort, writes Annabel Walker

MOST PEOPLE DON'T approach a visit of the doctor with much relish, so the idea of volunteering to see your physician when you feel fine may seem a little odd.

But those who follow traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) routinely visit their doctor at the start of every season. Patients seek advice about diet and health in an attempt to prepare for whatever the changing weather may throw at them.

"It's preventative medicine," says Vivien Chou Mei-mei, executive director of Integrated Chinese Medicine (ICM), a company that runs a website to educate people about TCM and sells products and supplements. "I tell people that, if you have a good doctor, you should never get sick. The idea is to stay well and not wait until symptoms of sickness appear."

A fundamental principle of TCM, developed over thousands of years, is that people's health and happiness are linked to nature. The aim is to balance a body's opposite tendencies: the yin and yang. These are affected by daily and seasonal cycles of nature, which are broken down into the five elements of water, wood, fire, earth and metal.

An imbalance in opposing conditions, such as the body's natural state of heat (fire) and cold (water), blocks the *qi*, or vital energy. TCM seeks to redress imbalances with a range of treatments such as acupuncture, medication, massage and *qigong* (a form of exercise that promotes healing through movement and meditation).

Many TCM principles are ingrained in local culture. The requirement that the five elements of taste – sour, bitter, pungent, sweet and salty – should be balanced manifests itself in the preference for many dishes rather than a surfeit of one. There's also the change of menu according to season – not just because of

Roots of good health

mends particular foods for different times of the year.

"Thousands of years ago, TCM practitioners knew that too much sweet food or too much salt wasn't good for health," says Angela Collingwood, chief editor of the ICM website and a former nurse.

"This was long before we knew about

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conditions such as hypertension. In the late 1800s, TCM was the predominant form of medicine in China. It recognised many diseases such as goitre, diabetes, asthma – and treated them successfully."

A lack of clinical studies of TCM's efficacy in treating a multitude of conditions has meant that, for many years, it's been the poor relation of conventional treatment. That's now changing – particularly with the growing interest in alternative therapies.

TCM practitioners such as Sally Tse Yuen-ye, who has run a clinic and shop in Causeway Bay for the past five years, say they've noticed increasing openness to Chinese medicine.

"Since the government has asked doctors to be registered, people think they're more official and they're coming to us with all kinds of problems," says the herbalist, who is the third generation of her family to practise Chinese medicine.

"They either choose to see a Chinese medicine doctor or they use western medicine, but they come to see us as a complement. In many cases, they can work together and the results are faster."

She says that conditions such as skin allergies, diabetes and asthma can benefit from both conventional and TCM treatments.

Demand for TCM may be growing, but Chou says the progress is too slow. "We are moving at the pace of a turtle here," she says.

Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, in his 1997 policy address, said Hong Kong should become an international centre for TCM and that its practice should be expanded within the health system. Back then a few hospitals, none of them public, had associated TCM centres.

Today, the Hospital Authority (HA)

Yan Chai, Tung Wah and Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole hospitals. It plans to open at least three more units in 2005/06. There are also plans for a pilot in-patient TCM service for selected patient groups.

"In practice, if you're a patient and you go to a public hospital you'll still be screened in a western way," says Collingwood. Blood tests and X-rays, for instance, are done before a TCM consultation.

Although doctors trained in conventional medicine may be reluctant to suggest consulting a TCM practitioner, cost is another barrier. Few insurance policies cover TCM, so people without the resources may be discouraged from trying it.

"It's very difficult to write a policy to cover it," says Collingwood. "People have different constitutions, so it may mean that a different treatment is prescribed for the same disease."

That's the sort of response that can meet with the disapproval of some insurance companies. And, says Chou, many people regard TCM as a last resort – meaning that, by the time they consult TCM practitioners, they often already have well-developed conditions or diseases such as cancer that established medicine has failed to treat.

Despite this, she says, TCM remedies have been shown to help in treating serious ailments and combating the side effects of conventional treatments for chronic conditions, including cancer.

Next week, a new weekly column written by Angela Collingwood and her colleague Rose Tse will explore in more detail the history and principles of traditional Chinese medicine. The columns will give practical guidelines and information.