

Business focus



The AcuMedic Centre in London. More than 150 Chinese herbal medicine remedies, mainly those for curing depression, gynecology and skin diseases, are popular in the UK.

XU YANHUA / FOR CHINA DAILY

A BITTER PILL TO DIGEST

UNEASY TRADITIONAL MEDICINE PRACTITIONERS SEE LIGHT AT END OF TUNNEL IN NEW UK REGULATIONS

By ZHANG HAIZHOU

Tucked away in the busy alleyways of Camden High Street in London is AcuMedic, a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) center that has been slowly making waves over the years. Set up in 1972, AcuMedic is now the biggest TCM shop in the UK and has under its wings several departments, a full-fledged clinic with consultation rooms, a bookstore that gives insight into TCM, a shop that sells Chinese health products like green tea and dried chrysanthemum and a pharmacy that sells herbal medicines.

Mei Man-fong, the founder of AcuMedic, who says he is in his 60s but looks much younger and dapper, settles down for his interview with China Daily with a cup of green tea.

He says that he owes his sprightly appearance to TCM.

Mei says that roughly 500

patients visit the center every week, with the total number of registered patients having crossed 250,000 till date.

His most famous patient was the late Princess Diana who visited the center in the 1990s under the name of "Mrs Wales" for acupuncture treatment to relieve stress.

Recalling those years, Mei says Diana's visit was like a springboard for TCM clinics in Britain.

But the years of steady growth may soon disappear if the new European Union (EU) directive on herbal medicines comes into being fully.

Under the EU's Traditional Herbal Medicinal Products Directive (THMPD), herbal remedies will now only be available on prescription from practitioners and all over the counter medications need to be registered and approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

The MHRA is a British government agency responsible for ensuring that all medicines and medical devices are safe.

"If the THMPD is fully implemented, TCM will face huge obsta-

cles," says Mei, adding AcuMedic sells more than 129 Chinese herbal medications.

Richard Woodfield, the MHRA's head of herbal medicine policy, said in a recent interview that the legislation is important as until now, consumers had no clue on whether the medications were safe for use.

Complicated process

TCM practitioners, however, feel that the procedures are too complicated and due to the extensive quality checks of the ingredients, many Chinese herbal products may not be registered by the MHRA.

Unlike other herbal medicine products, most of the TCM remedies consist of different kinds of herbs.

"The procedures are quite exhaustive. It extends to quality assurance. And the more herbs you have in a product, the more complicated it becomes," says Michael McIntyre,

chairman of the European Herbal & Traditional Medicine Practitioners Association.

"That is one reason ... why the THMPD is an unsuitable vehicle for Chinese traditional medicine. Many TCM products have six or eight herbs and in some cases up to 14 herbs," McIntyre says.

Liuwei Dihuang capsules, a classic TCM remedy from the Song Dynasty (960-1279) eras, is one of the most popular remedies in the UK market for kidney nourishment. But the capsules have six herbs in them and each herb may in turn contain several chemical ingredients. With such a complex structure, getting the approval and registration can often be a time consuming and expensive process.

"There are also several other reasons as to why the THMPD is not a suitable vehicle, or a suitable law, for the TCM.

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"TCM is not like Western medicine. You can't just say that you have a headache and pop a painkiller. It is a problem that needs to be checked before medication is given. Even if there is strict quality control, how does one market the products?" he asks, adding THPMD is not suitable for legislating Chinese medicines.

The THPMD first became a law in the UK in 2004. McIntyre says that very few people paid attention to it at that time due to the seven-year grace period.

Products registered under the new dispensation have been "very limited" till now, say British media reports, "with just 50 herbs being included". Not a single Chinese medicine product has, however, been registered.

Shen Huijun, president of the Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine (ATCM) in the UK, however feels that all is not lost for the TCM sector.

In the UK market, according to Shen, acupuncture accounts for 60 percent of the sector while herbal medicines constitute the rest.

Even when the THPMD is fully implemented, only industrially manufactured herbal products will be banned. They only account for about a quarter of all the Chinese herbal medicines in the market. The sale of loose herbs and other self-made products will not face any restrictions, he says.

Shen also says that there is even "no need for retailers to withdraw manufactured products immediately, as retail sales are allowed till the shelf life of the products expires".

More than 150 Chinese herbal medicine remedies, mainly those for curing depression, gynecology and skin diseases, are popular in the UK.

Shen, however, admits that some TCM product pharmacies may go out of business when the THPMD is fully effective.

"But the sector will survive," he says.

Silver lining

Even as the THPMD clouds gather, TCM practitioners are busy looking for new strategies to continue their business.

Another development that may augur well for the industry is expected to come out next year. From 2012, the British government plans to introduce additional statutory regulations for all herbal medicine practitioners and will be enforced by the Health Professions Council (HPC).

The new rules intend to give herbal therapists licenses to prescribe unlicensed herbal medicines that have not been registered under the THPMD.

"We initially thought that there was no hope until the HPC registration for herbal medicine practitioners was launched. Now, we feel that there's a ray of hope," says Mei.

But with HPC registrations not slated to start until April 2012, the intervening period may be tough for TCM pharmacies, says Mei.

But the important thing is that the new dispensation means that TCM practitioners will finally get



A customer chooses herbal teas in the AcuMedic Centre in London. There are about 2,000 TCM clinics in the UK.

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Quality is the right prescription

Leading TCM professionals have urged practitioners to pay more attention to improving the quality of the services they provide, even as the road ahead seems to be filled with potholes.

Mei Man-fong, vice-chairman of the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies and founder of the AcuMedic Centre, has come down heavily on those who are attempting to "commercialize" the TCM sector.

"The biggest trouble is that many businessmen think TCM is a goose that lays golden eggs," he says. "It is these kind of people who are jeopardizing the sector's image," he says.

His call comes close on the heels of an EU directive on herbal medicines and the British government's plan to register all TCM practitioners with the Health

Professions Council (HPC).

Though getting legal status is good for practitioners, it is not the lack of public recognition that is the root cause for the EU directive, he says.

Mei opened AcuMedic, the biggest TCM Centre in the UK in 1972 in north London's Camden High Street and soon had celebrities like the late Princess Diana as its patients.

The Diana wave, however, also propelled a flurry of businessmen to set up TCM shops to cash in on the boom.

"A lot of Chinese herbal medicine shops opened. They opened chains; they were called Chinese herbal McDonald's. I was against such a development because I think medicine is about people's health," Mei says.

By current estimates there are around 2,000 TCM clinics in the UK.

"You can't start opening McDonald's-style chains. Although it is just herbal medicine dispensation, there is a method of doing it and it follows certain set procedures. If these are not adhered to the products could endanger people's health," he says.

Mei says that these chains have sullied the TCM image as quite a few medical accidents happened in late 1990s and early 2000s.

"Media perception about TCM has also turned from hot to cold, and then to critical," he says.

Mei says that the HPC registration scheme means qualified TCM practitioners will gain legal status. It also means Britain will start to "recognize TCM as a medical science".

"There's no prospect being in 'alternative medicine' forever," Mei says, adding that he hopes TCM would soon be integrated



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Mei Man-fong has fought for decades to push TCM into the mainstream.

into mainstream medicine. But for that to happen "it is important that practitioners improve their quality of service and delivery," he says.

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legal status in the UK, says Mei, who has been fighting for decades to push TCM into the mainstream.

There are around 2,000 TCM clinics and practitioners in the UK. Currently, anyone, including those without any academic or strict training, can open a clinic and call himself/herself a TCM doctor.

The House of Lords in November 2001 submitted a report on complementary medicine and acupuncture to the government, marking the start of the effort to legally regulate

TCM and other herbal medicine practitioners. The HPC was founded a year later.

On Feb 16 this year, British Health Secretary Andrew Lansley reiterated his government's decision to enforce the regulation from April 2012.

"It will no longer be legal for herbal practitioners in the UK to source unlicensed manufactured herbal medicines for their patients as the THPMD takes full effect in May," Lansley said in a written statement to Parliament. "This government

wishes to ensure that the public can continue to have access to these products," the statement says.

"The major roadblock for TCM practitioners would be their ability to master English and it could finally tip the scales for an HPC registration," says Shen.

A key criterion of the HPC registration is that all TCM practitioners should achieve a score of 6.5 in the International English Language Testing System. That score is equivalent to the entry requirement

for master's degrees in most British universities.

Shen feels that over 70 percent of ATCM's 740 members, who are all well-trained TCM doctors, will not be able to achieve that score, especially the older ones. "It's impossible for them to learn English at their age."

The ATCM, one of the oldest and biggest TCM practitioners' organization in the UK, is now in talks with the HPC to lower the English score threshold.