

HEALTH

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TCM: updating remedies

Medicinal herbs, including minerals and animal compounds used in traditional Chinese medicine, are gaining greater acceptance nowadays. Herbalists and TCM clinics have set up shop in many countries.

While a chemically derived drug usually addresses a single problem, herbal medicine is thought to be able to address several problems simultaneously. Herbal medicine consists of many constituents. Its pharmacological action can be due to a particular chemical or the complex interactions between the constituents. Herbal medicine is in tune with the healing power of nature.

There is a growing need to monitor and scientifically research these medicines using modern techniques to provide qualitative and quantitative analyses, in order to guarantee their safety and efficacy.

Modern technologies being used or developed for the quality control of TCM include many analytical techniques used in western pharmaceutical research. This is necessary to ensure the standardisation of TCM. In addition to evaluation of the toxicity and side effects of TCM, clinical tests such as double-blind trials are conducted to ensure its safety and efficacy.

Traditional herbs have also been the major sources of many drugs used in western medicine. In developing a drug, a herb or herbal formulation from folk remedies or clinics is investigated and

hopefully the result is a promising new active natural product or their synthetic analogues. The active ingredients of the target drug are used for the next stage of its development. In this stage, toxicity and efficacy are determined. Clinical trials are the ultimate goal.

A successful example of TCM clinical research is the development of the anti-malaria drug, artemisinin. As conventional drugs such as chloroquine are becoming increasingly ineffective, scientists have been on the lookout for new drugs. In the 1960s, Chinese scientists started to screen traditional anti-malarial herbs from a list of nearly 200 herbs and found that extracts of the plant *Artemisia annua* offered high efficacy rates in overcoming malaria. After years of research, artemisinin and its derivatives are now standard components of malaria treatment.

While western medicine employs pure, single compounds to address human diseases, TCM mainly uses multiple combinations of herbs to treat and relieve symptoms.

To continue the legacy of Chinese medicine, TCM research must continue to identify and improve the efficacy of herbal active principals both singly and in combination with active ingredients.

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