

# Traditional

A quarter of the world's population can't be wrong. That's how many people use Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and, as *Kate Johnston* discovers, there's no madness in this ancient method.

There's an old Chinese saying about health: waiting for full-blown symptoms before treating an illness is like digging a well after one has become thirsty. Our mothers and their mothers before them knew that an ounce of prevention equals less pain later. Making time to give your body engine a fine-tune at the Chinese doctor not only keeps your wheels turning, it adds power to your motor.

Over thousands of years, practitioners of TCM have developed a system based on our interdependence with nature to treat the symptoms *and* the source of a problem – potentially putting themselves out of a job. In fact, in ancient times, a doctor didn't get paid until the patient had

## Did you know?

If your TCM practitioner prescribes acupuncture but you have an aversion to needles, there is a machine called the action potential stimulator. The doctor attaches pads to the acupuncture points, turns on the machine and it transfers electrical impulses, which do the same job as needles.



been cured! To this day, Chinese doctors believe a cure is possible, if the patient is willing to look honestly at their health from all angles. Thus a visit to a TCM practitioner today includes a discussion of diet, exercise and emotional issues, as well as acupuncture or herbal treatments.

## A healthy tightrope

TCM believes that if you are functioning in balance and harmony, your inbuilt healing mechanisms are better able to fight illness. This balance and harmony, or lack of them, is reflected in the body's organ functions.

Dr Raphael Lim says the body is like a map that TCM practitioners are trained to read. "We believe that life force or *Qi* [pronounced 'chi'] travels on pathways called meridians," he says. "Each of these meridians is linked to a specific organ. A blockage of *Qi* on a certain meridian results in a dysfunction of that organ.

## What TCM treats best

- skin disorders: eczema, psoriasis
- immune-related disorders
- diabetes
- liver, kidney and gall bladder conditions
- muscular-skeletal problems: back-ache, arthritis, fibromyalgia (constant pain of a non-descriptive nature)
- headaches, migraines
- nervous disorders, hypertension, stress, anxiety, depression
- hay fever, sinusitis, colds, flu
- digestive problems, irritable bowel syndrome, constipation, indigestion, heartburn
- hormonal problems, menstrual problems, menopause.

# Chinese Medicine

"There's a number of ways we diagnose how strong or weak the *Qi* is in these organs. For instance, inspection of the tongue – each part of the tongue corresponds to an organ. We also take the radial pulse and check the abdomen and other pressure points along the body. There's a whole art of pulse diagnosis. In the old days a doctor didn't even speak to you. You'd just put your hand through a little door and they'd feel your pulse."

TCM also thinks in terms of principles of nature, such as yin and yang (see box to the right). "We use analogies with nature," says Dr Lim. "For instance, we describe body fluids as like rivers, channels or reservoirs. And we diagnose in terms of wind, heat, cold, dryness and dampness. That might sound poetic, but it's not a folk medicine."

## Be food wise

Dr Lim says it's not just a matter of finding the perfect diet and sticking to it. A good diet adapts to your condition. "Say you have a cold," he says. "You feel cold and if you eat refrigerated food, fruit, or vegetables like cucumbers, these foods have cold properties and will make things worse. Eating warming foods, such as ginger or spring onions, will warm you up. And if you've got phlegm, eating dairy products or bananas and mangoes will produce more mucus, so eat something drier, like pears or a little bit of chilli to dry out the dampness."


"I had both Western and TCM training. In China, Western medicine and TCM are practised side-by-side. There's research showing that both together are effective in treating acute, chronic and life-threatening conditions, such as liver cancer. TCM can minimise the harshness or side effects of medication or it can increase its effectiveness."

## Tailor made

Without the luxury of modern technology, doctors in China developed their theories from observation. Thus, TCM treats the patient as an individual.

"Everyone is different," says Dr Lim. "One person can come in with the same complaint as another, but different organs will be affected. We believe no single treatment will work for everyone; they must be tailor-made to that individual, because the condition could get worse if you give the same herb to two people with different organ dysfunction."

That personal touch is something the oft-faceless Western medical system could work towards improving. Of course, for certain conditions, nothing can beat a visit to the GP or hospital. "If you've broken your foot, go to a Western doctor," laughs Dr Lim.

But rather than spending dollar after dollar after you've admitted you are ill, or saving money by not even seeking help, consider another choice: prevention. Sometimes spending a little saves a lot. Wasn't that also what our mothers told us? 

## Force of nature

The concept of yin and yang reflects a principle of nature: opposite forces are, in fact, mutually dependent and complementary, in that they make a whole. TCM applies this concept of 'opposites in balance' to the body, boiling it down to function: Something is either functioning too much or too little, or something has too much substance or not enough – too yin or too yang. Foods are also considered either yin or yang in function.



## → MORE

Dr Raphael Lim practices TCM and Thought Field Therapy (TFT), a mind-body system which uses acupuncture points to relieve emotional distress. His Melbourne clinic, the Mayfield Chinese Medical Clinic, also offers Chiropractic services. Ph (03) 9437 7728

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