

POLICY REVIEW

Plan aims to give TCM a big boost

Innovation, talent development keys to revitalizing traditional Chinese medicine

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China has recently released a plan to revitalize traditional Chinese medicine through a series of major programs aimed at boosting TCM healthcare services, training doctors and promoting innovation, as well as advancing the integration of TCM and Western medicine, according to a circular released on Feb 28.

"TCM played an important role in the fight against COVID-19 ... and its development has entered a strategic stage of opportunity," the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine said on March 3 in a statement explaining the circular. "But some urgent problems remain, such as a shortage of systematic programs and platforms focusing on TCM."

Sun Zhicheng, deputy director of the National Development and Reform Commission's Social Development Bureau, said that since the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20) period, the central government has dedicated nearly 50 billion yuan (\$7.28 billion) to developing and improving TCM-related projects, including upgrading the infrastructure and facilities of 670 county-level TCM clinics.

Meanwhile, another 1.2 billion yuan has been invested in 19 TCM universities. The annual number of undergraduate graduates majoring in TCM or those with higher degrees in the subject rose from 32,000 in 2015 to 46,000 in 2020, he said during a forum held in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, on March 22.

"However, we are also confronting a number of challenges, including a lack of innovation," he said. "The number of new TCM drugs applying for registration and approval has remained at a low level for years, and domestic TCM companies typically invest insufficient funds into scientific research and pay inadequate attention to products."

As a result, Sun said that the total revenues for TCM companies dropped from 780 billion yuan in 2015 to 650 billion yuan in 2019.

He added that some hospitals and health experts do not have a full understanding of the significance of the integration of TCM with Western medicine. The number of experienced TCM practitioners, researchers and grassroots doctors is also lacking.

Addressing challenges

Zhai Huaqiang, a professor at the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine's School of Chinese Materia Medica, emphasized the lack of innovation, multidisciplinary scientific research platforms, clinicians and researchers as some of the key challenges.

"The circular mandates strengthening the implementation of major programs, securing funds and stepping up regular monitoring and evaluation," he said during an interview with the People's Daily newspaper.

"This would be conducive to helping the TCM sector address bottlenecks."

In order to expand medical resources, the circular stated that China will create several national TCM centers, a number of national TCM departments and 130 specialized hospitals and rehabilitation centers that incorporate TCM practices.

Every county-level hospital should have two specialized TCM departments and a TCM promotion center, it added.

The document also stated that around 35 TCM treatment centers for infectious diseases are planned and that TCM should be applied promptly in the prevention and control of such diseases and in the event of public health emergencies.

In the future, a series of key national TCM laboratories and 30 TCM inheritance and innovation centers will be built.

The document stated that 1,200 people will be trained in TCM clinical treatment, ethnic medicine and TCM studies, and free tuition will be given to roughly 7,500 students on the basis that they agree to work in rural areas after.

Li Yu, head of the administration's science and technology department, said that innovative TCM therapies have been developed to treat strokes, lung cancer, diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

He said that one example of TCM innovation is the discovery that arsenic can be used to treat blood cancer.

Chen Zhu, an academician with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a prominent blood disorder specialist, has successfully demonstrated the workings of arsenic, a substance known for its toxicity and used as an ancient TCM therapy, in targeting and killing specific proteins that keep cancerous cells alive. The finding has helped lift the five-year survival rate of leukemia patients to around 90 percent.

A team led by Liu Baoyan, chief researcher at the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences, also discovered the efficacy of acupuncture in relieving incontinence in women.

"The finding has been widely acknowledged by the international community and helps spread acupuncture globally," Liu said.

Liu Liang, an academician with the Chinese Academy of Engineering and a top TCM expert, said that the discovery of the anti-malarial Artemisinin by Nobel laureate Tu Youyou, is another example of the way of pursuing innovation in TCM can be beneficial.

"The traditional experience of



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TCM should not be lost, but modern technology is also essential to the process," he said.

Blending East and West

The document added that a long-term mechanism designed to coordinate TCM and Western medicine will be set up, including the establishment of 50 flagship hospitals and a number of flagship clinical departments.

The COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, Hubei province, in 2020

yielded a fruitful model for the efficient use of both TCM and Western medicine, the National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine said.

"Building flagship hospitals is one way of promoting this experience," it added.

Huang Luqi, president of the China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences, said that TCM has played a vital role in the fight against the virus.

"When influenza, the common cold and COVID-19 are circulating at

the same time, TCM aimed at relieving symptoms can be administered at home and prevent hospitals from becoming overstretched," he said.

Huang added that TCM therapies can shorten the hospitalization period in mild and moderate cases, help prevent high-risk patients from becoming even more ill and reduce the mortality rate of critical and severe cases.

"Many recovered patients who report lingering symptoms such as

coughing, fatigue and sweating also found TCM medicines effective in alleviating the aftereffects," he said.

In addition, the circular emphasized the need to increase the recognition of TCM globally.

As of September, TCM was available in some form in 196 countries and regions, said Wu Zhendou, head of the administration's international cooperation department.

Xinhua News Agency contributed to this story.

New building standards set for rural, community-level medical facilities

By WANG XIAOYU

The National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine has recently released a set of construction standards for community-level or rural TCM departments as part of efforts to improve TCM services.

The TCM department at community healthcare centers or rural clinics should be no less than 300 square meters in size and contain at least three examination rooms, each no less than 10 sq m in size, as well as at least two treatment rooms taking up no less than 40 sq m in total.

The detailed requirements were laid out in a guideline released by the administration on March 15.

It stated that TCM doctors at a grassroots clinic should account for no less than 25 percent of its total number of physicians.

"The TCM department should also send at least one doctor to study at higher-level hospitals or enroll in tutorial programs every year," it said,

adding that such hospitals should dispatch an experienced TCM doctor to provide guidance and give diagnoses at a grassroots TCM department at least once a week.

A TCM department at the grassroots level should be capable of delivering at least six kinds of services and be equipped with equipment necessary for TCM diagnoses, treatment and rehabilitation.

"TCM tools should be used to help rehabilitate patients recovering from strokes, physical injuries and other health issues," it added.

China aims to establish a TCM department at all community or township-level health institutions by 2025, and to encourage more advanced regions to improve infrastructure and services at 15 percent of departments in their jurisdiction, according to an action plan released by 10 government agencies in March last year.

"An increasing number of people are putting their trust in TCM ther-

pies, prompting us to expand TCM departments," Zhou Lijin, head of the central health clinic of Shiyuan township in Jiangsu province, said during an interview with the Modern Express newspaper.

Wu Hong, head of the TCM department at a community health center in Gaoyou city, Jiangsu province, said that for the past several years, 30 percent of the patients who come to the center visit his department.

"The TCM section here occupies about 800 sq m and has 11 departments capable of delivering six kinds of therapy, including acupuncture and moxibustion," Wu said.

Jiangsu plans to invest 100 million yuan (\$14.6 million) into upgrading grassroots TCM departments between 2021 and 2025, according to the provincial health authority.

Each TCM department that meets these criteria will receive a one-off subsidy of 300,000 yuan, it added.

Policy Digest

Tour guide competition back after 3-year hiatus

Together with three other central departments, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism will launch the fifth national tour guide competition in an effort to boost the recovery of the tourism industry.

In a statement released online in late March, it said that provincial-level regions should carry out their own rounds of qualification between April and June and nominate two finalists each before June 30.

Local authorities should emphasize the importance of the competition and understand its role in restoring the development of the tourism industry, the ministry said, asking authorities to carefully organize qualifying rounds.

They should also encourage tour guides to participate, and promote public awareness of the competition through a variety of channels, including radio, television, newspapers and the internet.

The final event of the fourth national tour guide competition was held in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region in September 2019.

More tombs expected to be swept this year

The Ministry of Civil Affairs has asked local authorities to make plans for the upcoming Qingming Festival, or Tomb Sweeping Day, to ensure the annual rituals commemorating ancestors and deceased family members unfold in a safe, orderly manner.

Wang Jinhua, head of the ministry's social affairs department, made the remark during a news conference on Friday.

After three years of strict COVID-19 controls, China downgraded management of the disease in January. As a result, many more people are expected to observe Qingming this year, which falls on Wednesday. Many of those who were unable to return home for the past three years are expected to do so for the festival this year, leading to a rise in the number of people attending rituals, according to Wang.

The ministry has required local authorities to resume full funeral services, and has forbidden arbitrary restrictions or suspensions of such services, Wang said.

Ministry cracks down on invasive species

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs has asked agricultural authorities to continue to improve efforts to prevent and control invasive species.

In a meeting held in Wenchang, Hainan province in March, the ministry asked authorities to focus on major invasive species, including the golden apple snail, the common water hyacinth and the bitter vine, and ensure they are eradicated as quickly as possible using measures suited to local conditions.

Calling for early detection and treatment, the ministry urged authorities to speed up surveys of invasive species and strengthen monitoring of areas that have already been invaded or which are at high risk.

The ministry stated that authorities should also crack down on the illegal introduction, release or discarding of invasive species and encourage the public to participate in prevention and control.

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