

New TCM Developments Underway in China

Editorial Staff

Traditional Chinese medicine has become a thriving industry, not just in the United States, but worldwide. Sales of traditional Chinese medicine products manufactured in China, according to the Xinhua News Agency, have grown at a rate of 20% per year for the past 20 years. In 1999, it is estimated that the sales of products manufactured by the TCM industry totaled some \$38.5 billion *yuan* (approximately \$4.62 billion in U.S. dollars) in China alone.

Sales on the international market, however, have been less than spectacular. Experts believe that the sales of TCM products from China to other countries amounted to only \$600 million in 1999, accounting for less than five percent of the total amount of TCM products sold worldwide that year.

As a result, government and industry officials have initiated a series of projects designed to speed up the country's production of traditional medicine. The projects, part of a five-year plan announced at the National Traditional Medicine Congress in Beijing this spring, are intended to increase the quantity (and quality) of Chinese medicinal products and services, and to make China a stronger competitor in the traditional medicine market.

Emphasis on Production, Research and Education

In eastern China, in the country's Anhui province, workers have finished the first phase of construction on a plant at the Wuhu Biomedical Science and Technology Garden. Covering three square kilometers, the plant is the largest of its kind in Asia (and the third largest in the world), and is expected to help for studying, extracting and processing traditional herbal medicines.

The second phase of construction is expected to begin later this year, with approximately one billion *yuan* (\$120 million U.S.) being spent to introduce a production line from Germany that will extract large quantities of natural herb essences using hydrosulphur dioxide.

To the south, in the Yunnan province, members of the Chinese Academy of Sciences have approved a feasibility report suggesting that a traditional Chinese medicine production base be built in the region. More than 6,500 varieties of medicinal herbs are grown in Yunnan, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all medicinal plants grown in China.

Construction of the base is expected to take five years and cost approximately 3.1 billion *yuan* (\$375 million). Five medicinal herb plantations, three demonstration zones and five medicine processing centers will be built in the first phase of construction, with more plantations and centers added over time.

While a great deal of time and money is being spent to increase herbal production, other projects related to improving the quality of TCM education and research are taking place in universities and hospitals throughout China. In Hong Kong, for instance, Chinese University of Hong Kong has joined forces with an Internet service organization to begin offering online education programs about herbs.

The program is scheduled to begin in September. Instruction will be presented in several languages (including Chinese, English, Japanese and Korean), and will be offered on a subscription basis to students and fledgling practitioners. The program is hoped to facilitate better standards of training among TCM practitioners, leading to improved education and better patient care.

"Bringing TCM education to the students in a very conventional way like classrooms, clinical research, and also on the Internet will actually help traditional Chinese medicine practitioners to get standardized," said Kelly Cheng, chief executive of Greater China Technologies.

In Shanghai, meanwhile, a research institute has been set up at Zhongshan Hospital. The facility is believed to be the first in the country to conduct comprehensive research on clinical nutrition.

According to press releases from the Xinhua and AsiaPulse news services, Zhongshan was one of the first hospitals in the country to examine the effects of nutrition on the body, with preliminary studies being conducted as far back as the 1960s. Through its research efforts, the hospital claims to have saved the lives of thousands of patients, dramatically reducing the death rates of diseases such as tuberculosis and pancreatic necrosis.

The developments in Anhui, Yunnan, Shanghai and other areas are largely the result of a plan announced during the 2001 National Traditional Medicine Congress in Beijing this past March. At the congress, She Jing, director of the Traditional Chinese Medicine Administration Bureau, announced that the central government would create tax and financial policies favorable to the country's traditional medicine hospitals.

Jing also announced that the government would open and begin operating more clinics in urban areas. These clinics would provide acupuncture and other methods of healing in an effort to satisfy an increasing demand for better health care. In addition, more medical school graduates would be sent to rural areas to provide for the nation's farmers, many of whom still lack basic health care.

Furthermore, a set of quality control guidelines for maximizing and modernizing Chinese medicine production would be sent to the State Council Development Research Center and the State Traditional China Medicine Administration Bureau for review. Finally, Jing stated that more efforts would be made to document and make available traditional treatment methods that might be considered valuable, but are currently found only in arcane texts.

Stay tuned for more updates on the modernization and industrialization of traditional Chinese medicine as they become available.

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