

Chinese medicine authorities brew a traditional prevention for world's newest flu epidemic

China Daily
Thomas Talhelm

In early May the Chinese Ministry of Health and the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine raised public debate when it unveiled a Chinese medicine scheme, including a prevention, to combat H1N1, the world's newest epidemic disease, popularly known as Swine Flu.

The concoction calls on mulberry leaves, cogongrass rhizome, honeysuckle and nine other ingredients to prevent the flu, but netizens have raised suspicions over how a traditional prevention could be made for such a new disease. "Have as anyone ever heard Chinese medicine say there's a disease they don't have a cure for?" joked a commenter on the popular message board site Douban.

Yet Chinese-language media have been quick to weigh in against those "who don't understand Chinese medicine." "From the perspective of Chinese medicine, the Swine Flu is not so different from other types of flu and can most certainly be prevented and treated by means of Chinese medicine," says Dr. Heiner Fruehauf, Founding Professor of the School of Classical Chinese Medicine in Portland, Oregon.

According to Chinese medicine theory, by adjusting the body to its environment, even people exposed to the virus will not become infected, says Dr. Liu Qingquan, director of Beijing University of Chinese Medicine's Dongzhimen Emergency Treatment Department. Based on his experience using Chinese medicine to treat patients with SARS, Dr. Liu explains Chinese medicine's theoretical framework for fighting diseases like H1N1: "The environment that we find ourselves in might have the Swine Flu virus . . . but [if you're properly suited to your environment] Chinese medicine thinks it's not nosogenetic [harmful] to you, whereas it is nosogenetic to me."

According to Dr. Xu Wenbing, Chinese medicine doctor and Chairman of the Hope Institute of Chinese Medicine in Beijing, Chinese medicine treatments for SARS and the H1N1 do not attack the virus. Instead, they try to remove the body's internal conditions that make it possible for the virus to live. "There is no medicine to directly kill the virus. A virus is like a seed: it needs things like temperature and water to grow," Dr. Xu says. "We take away these conditions, and the body will

cure itself."

In adjusting the body to fight H1N1, doctors of Chinese medicine are using medicines that target the digestive system. Whereas medicines designed for SARS treated the respiratory system, medicines for H1N1 target the digestive system, reflecting the finding that the illness triggers symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhea.

In order to treat the digestive system, Chinese medicine takes into account factors like the season and the weather. The summer season, says Dr. Xu, can throw off the digestive system, cutting appetite, sending the body's heat to the surface, and making the stomach cold.

Dr. Xu suggests some simple steps to put the stomach's temperature back in balance: "Drink hot water and put ginger or cinnamon inside. If people always eat cold beverages, eat ice cream, or drink water directly from the refrigerator, it means they will harm their stomach." Chinese medicine classifies green tea, milk, and ice cream as having a cold nature, so practitioners recommend avoiding them during the summer months.

This year's Chinese medicine response echoes the response to the SARS epidemic six years ago. At the time, Chinese news media reported shortened hospital stays for SARS patients who took Chinese medicine, sometimes in combination with Western medicine. Chinese communities in Hong Kong and Singapore also saw throngs of worried citizens rushing Chinese medicine stores to buy herbs to ward off the disease. Since the outbreak of H1N1, Chinese media have reported increased sales of Indigowoad Root, known locally as *banlangen*, and even a 50% increase in the price of honeysuckle, both of which are thought to treat the flu.

During regular hospital operation, Chinese patients are much more likely to consult Western medicine, rather than traditional medicine. Statistics reported in the *Fazhi Wanbao* show that out of 5,000-8,000 daily patients to the Beijing Friendship Hospital, only 200-300 consulted the Chinese medicine division. But in the uncertain face of a modern epidemic, some Chinese are turning to traditional culture and ancient sources, like the 2,000-year-old Chinese medical guide *Neijing Suwen* or *The Inner Canon of Huangdi* for solutions. One blog through the popular portal Sina even uses the text to fix a date on the end of the epidemic: July, 23rd.

Yet Chinese medicine's effectiveness against SARS was never proven

conclusively, and even more uncertainty surrounds H1N1. In a 2003 report from the Institute of Traditional Medicine in Portland, Oregon, director Dr. Subhuti Dharmananda concluded, "With a new disease like SARS, it is almost impossible to know if the herbs that may have prevented or treated a similar disease will be effective for this one."

One factor hampering Chinese medicine is that many Chinese treatments still lack Western clinical research support. Some doctors of Chinese medicine, like Dr. Qi, argue that treatment should continue even without research evidence. "The outcomes of some physical and chemical tests in Western medicine and their relation to evidence for Chinese medicine are still unclear, so we can not bother with that for the moment," says Dr. Qi. Others argue that Western methods of scientific research aren't suitable for Chinese medicine's focus on individual treatment.

Yet even some doctors who practice Chinese medicine are wary of the Ministry of Health's announcement, arguing that Chinese medicine cannot be blanket-prescribed. "For certain groups of people, as with the 'young and healthy crowd' susceptible to the Swine Flu, they might have certain commonalities, so preventions may have certain similarities, but this is only an approximation," said Dr. Qi.

Dr. Fruehauf insists that, to be effective, Chinese medicinal treatments must be tailored to the individual: "No responsible Chinese medicine physician would blanket-prescribe the same remedy for thousands of people and expect that it will work for all of them."