

• Review

Prospects of a comprehensive evaluation system for traditional Chinese medicine services

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is a unique health resource in China and one of the main representative traditional medicines globally. TCM has formed a new way of looking at medical practices, health care, scientific research, education, industry and culture. It focuses on promoting and safeguarding the health of people, with an increasing contribution to economic and social development. Establishing a comprehensive evaluation system in accordance with the characteristics of TCM services could promote the scientific merit and the standardization of services management. This would improve health service quality and the social and economic benefits of TCM. It would broaden the field of TCM services research. It would also provide the basis for the formulation of relevant government policies. This study estimates the prospect of establishing a comprehensive evaluation system of TCM services.

Keywords: medicine, Chinese traditional; complementary medicine; alternative medicine; evaluation system; review

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1 Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) health services are continuously developing and are becoming globalized at an accelerated pace. Social and economic changes are occurring alongside these developments. To accommodate these changes, the following questions need to be addressed urgently: (1) how do we improve the quality and level of TCM services? (2) how do we

effectively regulate the rationalization of TCM services? (3) how do we accommodate the demand for TCM services? (4) how can we conduct more appropriate assessments and supervise the safety and effectiveness of TCM services? We need to explore the establishment of a comprehensive evaluation system of TCM services. In addition to analyzing the current research on this topic, this study estimates the prospect of establishing a comprehensive evaluation system for TCM services.

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2 Globalization of traditional medicine

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the development of global health has entered a new stage. Traditional and complementary medicine is widely used throughout the world. More and more countries and regions have started to pay attention to this important health resource. In some countries where traditional medicine is a major source of health care, traditional medical health services are easily accessible; these countries have limited access to conventional health care and their traditional medical services are relatively more affordable. Such phenomenon is particularly common in Africa and some developing countries.^[1] In some countries and regions, for their own historical and traditional reasons, traditional medicine has been routinely used as an important part of the national health system, such as China, Republic of Korea and Singapore.^[2] In some developed countries where conventional medicine is well established, traditional medicine is often used as an adjunct to health services, such as many European countries and North America.^[3]

The status of traditional medicine and the practice of using traditional and complementary medicine vary widely in different countries, depending on the culture and understanding, as well as accessibility of conventional medicine. As a global health policy maker and coordinator, World Health Organization (WHO) has developed and published the “WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy (2014–2023)” in line with the Resolution on Traditional Medicine agreed to at the World Health Assembly.^[4] The report noted that in the past 10 years, due to the unremitting efforts of WHO Member States in the promotion of traditional and complementary medicine, there has been a huge expansion in medical practice, education and promotion of research. Under the auspices of WHO, Member States have formulated and implemented a number of policies and regulations in combination with their own traditional practices and supplementary medicinal products. However, WHO and individual governments have also noted that they need to provide choices and protection for consumers, through not only the regulation of traditional and complementary medical products, but also the regulation and supervision of traditional and complementary medical practices and practitioners. Such a strategy clearly sets out the objectives of “ensuring the quality assurance, safety, proper use and effectiveness of traditional and complementary medicine through the regulation of traditional and complementary medical products, practices and practitioners,”^[5] encouraging, advising and supporting Member States to establish performance monitoring standards and evaluation indicators, as well as a practical regulatory system for traditional and complementary medicine

practice and practitioners based on the characteristics, legislation and resources of their own countries.

3 Historic opportunity for the development of TCM services

As with its original formation and development, TCM continues to absorb and integrate knowledge from advanced natural sciences, humanities and philosophies of various times. In this way, it has gradually developed into a mature theoretical system, with abundant technical methods, and with distinctive features including treatment of the body as a whole, individualized therapy, accurate clinical efficacy, flexible treatment, prominent health care and other features. TCM is a unique health service resource that has wide applications, especially in grassroots health service agencies.^[6] TCM theory emphasizes the importance of the relationship between people and nature, believing that people’s normal life activities are an organic combination of psychological and physiological functions, which is consistent with the current concept of health and hygiene. Due to aging of the global population, the change in disease spectrum, the diversification of pathogenic factors and the redefining of health concepts, Western countries with highly developed modern medicine have begun to reexamine traditional medicine and non-drug treatments.^[7] Driven by the WHO, traditional medicine, including TCM, will have wider development opportunities.

Although the level of economic development still varies in different regions of China, the development of TCM policy and the investment of special funds provided by central and local government in recent years, have gradually improved the capacity and quality of the system of TCM services, promoting the characteristics and advantages of TCM services.^[8] In 2009, the State Council published “A Number of Opinions on the Development and Promotion of TCM” (government publication [2009] No. 22),^[9] and established a new plan for the comprehensive development of medical services, health care, education, scientific research, culture and industry of TCM. In order to comprehensively develop the health service industry, the State Council proposed and implemented the “Opinions of the State Council on Promoting the Development of the Health Service Industry” (government publication [2013] No. 40)^[10] in 2013, which clearly put forward the key tasks of “comprehensive development of TCM and health care services.” In April 2015, the General Office of the State Council issued the “TCM Health Service Development Plan (2015–2020)”.^[11,12] This comprehensively discusses the current and near-future development of the TCM health services in China. It is China’s first national health plan for the development of TCM health services.

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