

Introduction of the treatment method of Thai traditional medicine: Its validity and future perspectives

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Abstract Thai traditional medicine is one of the most valuable heritages handed down from Thai ancestors. In spite of increasing popularity of Western modern medicine, Thai traditional medicine is still widely used in taking care of health in daily life especially among the rural Thais. For the past decade, the government and private organizations have worked in collaboration to restore the values and popularity of Thai traditional medicine. Recently, the Ministry of Public Health has promoted the use of herbal medicine, and the Center for Herbal Information has collected data and performed scientific studies on this matter. Thai Massage Restoration Project has also revised the text on Thai traditional massage, which is now widely practised. The future prospects of Thai traditional medicine are rather positive because the Foundation for Restoring Thai Traditional Medicine and the College of Ayurvedic Medicine have the program and curriculum to produce personnel on traditional medicine. They have also attempted to integrate the basic knowledge of Western medicine into the study and practice of Thai traditional medicine.

Key words medicine, Thailand, traditional.

INTRODUCTION

Thai traditional medicine is a national identity, handed down from the wise Thai ancestors. These people had accumulated their experiences of health care in fighting against the problems of illness and disease since the period of Sukhothai (more than 700 years ago). Ramkhamhaeng, a great king at that time, had ordered the establishment of a large medicinal plant garden to serve as a source of drugs for the treatment of the ailments of his people.¹

Thai traditional medicine can be categorized into four major systems: traditional herbal medicine, psychological treatment, traditional massage and physical therapy, and traditional herbal medicine based on the element or humor theory.²

TRADITIONAL HERBAL MEDICINE

Traditional herbal medicine has been widely practiced in ancient Thai society. It is based on personal experiences of the people in a village or a community in a particular culture. This form of knowledge has existed and been inherent from one person to another, from one family to another or even from one culture to another. They tend to use medicinal herbs frequently found at or close to the home, by application, sniffing or oral routes (Table 1). The fruits of the ebony tree (*Diospyros mollis* Griff), for example, may be used for the treatment of intestinal

worms.³ The characteristics of the sky-capsule and the borapet capsule are illustrated in Tables 2 and 3.^{4,5} This is a form of self-reliance for the provision of health care.

Table 1. Traditional Herbal Medical

Oral route	Example: fruits of ebony tree (<i>Diospyros mollis</i> Griff)
Application route	Example: freeze-dried garlic (Chofibrin)
Sniffing route	Example: herbal medicine for sniffing (Yanut)

Table 2. Characteristics of the sky-capsule (Chiretta Leaf Capsule)

Composition	Each capsule contains dried Chiretta leaf powder (<i>Andrographis paniculata</i> Nees) 300 mg.
Indication	1. Anti-inflammatory, and antipyretic effect, cold, and fever. 2. Antibacterial effect for infection of upper respiratory system, tonsillitis, laryngitis, and skin infection. 3. Diarrhea, intestinal dysentery, abdominal cramp. 4. As bitter tonic.
Dosage	Two capsules, twice daily, before breakfast and supper.
Warning	Diarrhea, stomachalgia, and dizziness may occur, discontinuation of the medication is recommended.

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A natural product from the Medicinal Plant Development for Primary Health Care, Faculty of Pharmacy, Chiangmai University, Chiangmai, Thailand.



Table 3. Characteristics of the sky-capsule (Chiretta Leaf Capsule)

Composition	Each capsule contains dried Borapet stem powder (<i>Tinospora crispa</i> L.)
Indication	Antipyretic, bitter tonic, antihypertensive and calming effects.
Dosage	One capsule, two times daily before meals.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENT

Some people believe in astrology, the art of observing the positions of the stars or planets in the context that they can influence events, character, fate and health of human beings. When astrologers inform the person that they are in the period of bad luck with poor physical or mental health, they will conduct various ceremonies to give strength and courage (Sukwan), to ward off the bad luck (Songkrau or Sadorkrau) or to prolong their lives (Subjata).⁶ They will also perform a merit-making by offering food, alms and other necessities to the monks, or by releasing birds, fishes and turtles.

Some people go to folk or traditional doctors who not only use herbs but also use magical powers to cure. As for mental patients, especially psychotics, they may be treated by being sprinkled with holy water over their body or by beating them with holy sticks. The concept of treatment is based on the belief that the mental patients are possessed by the evil spirits.

October 24, 1995, was the total eclipse of the sun in Thailand and many Thai people were excited about this very rare event. According to Thai mythology, Rahu is the God of Darkness who swallows the sun and darkens the day. People who have faith in astrology and are born on the 8th, 18th, and 28th days of the months are advised to pay their respect to Rahu. The color black and the number 8 are the symbols of Rahu. In order to worship Rahu, these people must make eight offerings on the following Wednesday evening, such as black chicken, black jelly, black glutinous rice, black bean, black coffee or even coca cola. Because the most popular offering is black chicken, before and during this event the price of one black chicken increased from \$2.50 to \$3.00.

In some rural areas of Thailand, the people worship the Heavenly Spirit (Phipha) which is half-ghost, half-celestial being. They ask for the supernatural divine power using the medium to cure different diseases of the patients.² At present, in Maehongson, a northern province of Thailand, a Buddhist monk is using meditative practices to treat patients with AIDS or HIV infection (Table 4).

TRADITIONAL MASSAGE AND PHYSICAL THERAPY

Thai traditional massage has become increasingly popular in Thailand, even though its history can be traced back to the time when Buddha was still alive. It is believed that the founder of the

Table 4. Psychological treatment

A ceremony performed to give strength and courage to someone (Sukwan)
A ceremony performed to send off the bad luck or misfortune of someone (Songkrau or Sadorkrau)
Life-prolongation ceremony (Subjata)
Magical or spiritual ceremony to drive away evil spirit
Meditation
The worship of Heavenly Spirit (Phipha)
The worship of Rahu (God of Darkness)

Table 5. Thai traditional massage and physical therapy

Massage
Vapor or steam bath
Treatment of fracture

ancient art of massage is Jivaka Kumar Bhaccha who was a contemporary of Buddha and also his personal physician over 2500 years ago. In Thailand, the knowledge of Thai traditional massage was revived by King Rama III who had ordered the medical texts on this subject to be engraved at Phra Chetuphon Temple (Wat Pho) in 1832. Even today, one of the most outstanding massage schools in Thailand is located at Wat Pho in Bangkok.⁷

Thai traditional massage can be used to promote health and to treat some diseases in combination with vapor or steam baths and herbal medicine.⁸ In some rural areas, the folk or traditional healers have demonstrated their expertise in treating bone fractures. They tend to use bamboo sticks to make splints and most also use magical powers to promote the healing process (Table 5).

TRADITIONAL HERBAL MEDICINE BASED ON ELEMENT OR HUMOR THEORY

The only system accepted by the Thai government or the Ministry of Public Health is herbal medicine based on element or humor theory. In the body there are the following elements: earth (solidity), water (fluidity), fire (heat) and wind (motion) (Table 6). Most theories of Thai traditional medicine have originated from the four element theory.^{2,9} In every part of Thailand, schools for Thai traditional medicine exist and produce a small number of qualified traditional doctors annually. These doctors have to be given a traditional medical license approved by the Ministry of Public Health before they can go into practice.

VALIDITY AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Since the introduction of Western medicine to Thailand, the popularity of Thai traditional medicine has declined remarkably. Modern medicine has adopted new technology and used scientific theories as well as research data to promote health and to



Table 6. Herbal medicine based on element theory

Only this system is officially accepted by the Thai Government.
The element theory consists of earth (solidity), water (fluidity), fire (heat) and wind (motion).
The disease is caused by the disequilibrium of these four elements.

treat various diseases. A large amount of money has been used for all medical technologies, drugs and equipment imported from other countries. There are still some problems of the improper use of the modern medical technologies. However, modern medicine does not seem to include the concept of holism, especially in terms of psychological and sociocultural aspects.¹ On the contrary, the four systems of Thai traditional medicine are mixed together in the Thai society and they cover all physical, psychological, environmental and social aspects which determine the thought, feeling, faith, and lifestyle of rural Thais. Thai traditional medicine also tends to enhance national self-reliance for health care, instead of relying on modern drugs and medical technologies. Since the knowledge of Thai traditional medicine is not based on scientific theories and investigation, its validity, in general, remains questionable.

However, during the past decade both governmental and non-governmental organizations have worked in collaboration with each other in order to revive and promote the practice of Thai traditional medicine, so that it can become one of the alternative treatments for various diseases in Thai society again. The Ministry of Public Health has tried to initiate and upgrade the use of herbal medicine. The Foundation For Restoring Thai Traditional Medicine was recently established to collect data on different Thai herbs and to study their efficacy in treating the diseases. The Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine of Department of Medical Sciences was founded to study Thai traditional medicine in a scientific way and to pass on the knowledge of traditional treatments to those involved in this area.⁹

The International Seminar on Value and Utilization of Traditional Medicine and Health Development was held 10–13 March 1995 at Queen Sirikit National Convention Center in Bangkok.¹ At present, there has been an attempt to integrate the basic knowledge of Western medicine into the study program of Thai traditional medicine. For instance, the College of Ayurvedic Medicine has set up a 3-year program and curriculum to produce people who have a knowledge of both traditional and modern medicine. The students in this college have to study many subjects of basic medical sciences, such as anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, pathology, pharmacology etc. The curriculum also includes basic knowledge and clinical experience in Thai traditional medicine (Table 7).

The Thai Massage Restoration Project is now revising and updating the technique of Thai traditional massage which is commonly practiced almost throughout Thailand. Massage is invaluable for promoting health and well-being. In combination with herbal medicine, healthy and nutritious food and a healthy way of life, Thai traditional massage can provide bodily fitness, strength and comfort.⁸

Table 7. Curriculum for Certificate of Education in Ayurvedic Medicine (C.M.Ayurved)

	Credits
1. Basic Subjects	
1.1 Basic Sciences	4
1.2 Anatomy	5
1.3 Physiology	6
1.4 Pharmacology	4
1.5 Biochemistry	4
1.6 Pathology	3
1.7 Microbiology	3
1.8 Parasitology	3
1.9 Medical botany	3
1.10 Modern pharmacy	2
1.11 Pharmacognosy	6
1.12 Nutrition	1
2. Professional subjects	
2.1 Traditional medicine	17
2.2 Traditional pharmacy	10
2.3 Traditional therapeutic massage	14
2.4 Internal medicine and diagnostics	10
2.5 Surgery	5
2.6 Orthopedic surgery	2
2.7 Obstetrics and gynecology	4
2.8 Midwifery	6
2.9 Pediatrics	2
2.10 Dermatology	2
2.11 Nature therapy	7
2.12 Medical practice	4
2.13 Ophthalmology-oto-laryngology	2
2.14 Home nursing	2
2.15 First aid	2
2.16 General psychology	1
2.17 Medical psychology	1
2.18 Radiology	1
2.19 Hygiene and public health	2
2.20 Primary health care	1
2.21 Preventive medicine	1
3. Auxiliary subjects	
3.1 Law for doctors	1
3.2 Medical ethics	6
3.3 English language	6
3.4 Thai language and culture	6

CONCLUSION

The future prospects for Thai traditional medicine is rather positive due to the Ministry of Public Health, other governmental and non-governmental organizations having worked together for the restoration and re-establishment of Thai traditional medicine in order that it will be accepted as another alternative mode of treatment as it was in the past.



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