

Miao remedies approach the mainstream

Law soon to take effect will let herbal experts from this ethnic group in Guizhou province pursue licenses to practice traditional Chinese medicine

By XU WEI and YANG JUN

Wang Zengshi's house is full of silk banners that have been presented to him by grateful patients. Some hang on the walls of his home, while others have been spread casually on the floor.

The practitioner of Miao traditional herbal medicine treats more than 30 patients a day at his clinic, and he often travels to other parts of the country to provide treatment.

"Some people only come to me when the hospital doctors say they are doomed, but I never refuse to see them," said the member of the Miao ethnic group, from Wengdong, a village in Leishan county in Southwest China's Guizhou province.

Wang's four-story complex is equipped with hospital beds, a pharmacy and a consulting room filled with patients' files.

Even though the 59-year-old dropped out of primary school after the third grade, his area of expertise is the treatment of bone fractures and snakebites. However, he claims he can also provide relief from, or even cure, a range of ailments including cancer and infertility.

"Patients come all the way to see me, so I have an obligation to look after them," he said, referring to the difficulty of reaching the village, deep in Leigong Mountain and only accessible to the outside world by a narrow, winding cement road.

Last year, Wang's clinic generated income of 2 million yuan (\$290,000) amid the rising popularity of traditional Miao medicine and treatment methods which is noticeable across the province.

In 2015, the total sales value of Miao herbal medicine in Guizhou was 20 billion yuan, surpassing the combined figures for traditional Tibetan, Mongolian and Uygur treatments, according to figures from the Guizhou Department of Science and Technology.

In the same year, a guideline issued by the provincial government pledged to accelerate the development of industries related to Miao herbal medicine and encourage the construction of new treatment centers in three nearby prefectures and

in Guiyang, the provincial capital.

To enable a larger number of Miao herbal medicines to gain acceptance as legal treatments, the provincial government is working to have more of them included in the Chinese Pharmacopoeia, a list of approved medicines, the guideline said.

Lin Ruichao, dean of the School of Chinese Materia Medica at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, said 155 Miao medicines have already been approved for use by the China Food and Drug Administration.

The inclusion of more Miao medicines in the pharmacopoeia would further increase the sector's influence, but local businesses still need to improve their products, he told a forum in July.

A number of publicly listed companies in Guizhou are now devoted to the research and production of Miao medicines.

Last year, Guizhou Bailing Group Pharmaceutical, one of the largest companies in the sector, registered total assets of nearly 4 billion yuan, according to its third-quarter report.

Wang's growing reputation on the Internet and in media reports has resulted in a rise in patients from around China.

"Some patients even help me book flights and hotels so that I can go and see them in their homes," he said.

The growth of social media has also enabled him to conduct long-distance consultations before sending herbal medicines to patients via courier services.

Last year, Wang saw more than 3,000 patients, and more than 40 percent of the consultations were conducted on WeChat.

Despite the growing popularity of traditional Miao remedies, many practitioners said the lack of certification and procedures to check credentials means the sector is vulnerable to fraud, which could tarnish its image.

Moreover, the fact that many practitioners live deep in the mountains and have received little formal education makes it difficult for the authorities to oversee their activities.

Under Chinese law, doctors are only allowed to treat patients after they have passed the relevant exams, and they must also obtain licenses



A VENDOR sells medicinal herbs at a market in Kaili city in Southwest China's Guizhou province. LIAN QIANYU / XINHUA



WORKERS in Tongren, Guizhou, plant herbs for use by traditional practitioners. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

from local health authorities to treat patients in their jurisdictions.

"Many herbal practitioners have treated patients in their villages for decades, and they have won the trust of people from near and far. However, they have never been licensed," said Ma Jun, a doctor at the administration office of Miao herbal medicine at the Kaili Hospital of Chinese Medicine in Guizhou.

According to Ma, unlike modern Western treatment or traditional Chinese medicines (TCM), Miao herbal medicine does not have a systematic method of evaluating practitioners.

"But the practitioners have proven track records of treating certain illnesses, and the curative effects are almost immediate," he said.

The situation may change on July 1, when the country's first law related to TCM, passed by the top legislature in December, takes effect. It will allow traditional practitioners to take exams organized by provincial-level TCM authorities that will focus on practical skills and treatment outcomes. They will also need to obtain recommendations from two certified practitioners.

Like some TCM practitioners, many Miao herbal experts learned their skills from a local teacher,

rather than through standard educational methods.

The law will allow them to obtain licenses to practice TCM, including Miao herbal medicine, and enter the mainstream, according to Deng Yong, a legal researcher at Beijing University of Chinese Medicine.

The changes will also make it easier to open individual practices and clinics by allowing practitioners to simply register with local health authorities, instead of obtaining official approval, he added.

Long Guangqiao, vice-dean of the People's Hospital in Songtao, a county in Guizhou, who also practices Miao herbal medicine, said the fact that many people regard herbal treatments as a last resort indicates a lack of trust.

He decided to stay in his position as vice-dean of the hospital to help build trust among patients, who he treats with traditional Miao herbal methods.

"Being a practitioner is like obtaining a driver's license," said Wang, the Miao practitioner. "You have to be precise in each of the treatment procedures and remember the exact times the herbs are ready to treat illnesses."

Accumulating experience through consultation with patients is also



LONG GUANGQIAO, vice-dean of the People's Hospital in Songtao county.

crucial: "A doctor's expertise is provided by their patients, and that's especially true for us."

He said about 1,700 kinds of herbs that can be used as medicines are found in his home region, and the curative effect of each herb differs greatly according to the different growth periods.

Long said the fact that many practitioners are unwilling to share their therapies with people other than members of their own families makes it difficult to pass on knowledge. "Many practitioners are also illiterate, which means they cannot write down their accumulated experience in books," he added.

Decades ago, the Miao people used herbal medicines to help people, rather than as a way of making a living, which is why many practitioners' children had little interest in learning about the treatments.

For example, in the 1950s, there were 900 traditional practitioners in Songtao, but now there are only about 100, Long said.

Despite having received his own training from about 15 experts, he was spurned by a number of practitioners he had asked to share their therapies.

"Some practitioners work behind closed doors, and some would rather see their knowledge lost than passed down to people outside their own family," he said.

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