

Chinese medicine flavour of month as West turns to tongue tonics

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IT WAS introduced to Australia during the gold rush, but in recent years the ancient Chinese tradition of herbal medicine has seen its own rush, with people embracing the practice in growing numbers.

In 2000, customers spent \$2.3 billion on alternative therapies including Chinese medicine - nearly four times the public contribution to all pharmaceuticals.

But while more Australians are adopting Chinese medicine, the ancient healing art is under attack in its country of origin, where some believe it to be ineffective and even dangerous.

Zhang Gongyao, a professor in the Department of Philosophy at the Central South University, has called for it to be scrapped from China's constitution.

Rey Tiquia, a Melbourne-based practitioner, said the backlash reflected China's desire to modernise, whereas the West was now looking towards more spiritual, holistic therapies.

The director of the World Health Organisation's Collaborative Centre for Traditional Medicine, **Professor Charlie Xue**, said Australia's interest in Chinese medicine had grown significantly in the past five years. In Victoria, the only state to have compulsory registration of practitioners, membership has doubled to 800 since 2001.

"We are an ageing population and chronic illness is becoming a major health burden [but] Western medicine does not have an effective cure for [some of] those conditions," he said.

The chronic nature of conditions such as asthma, eczema, allergies and hay fever meant about 20 per cent of people had sought traditional Chinese practices such as acupuncture and herbal medicine as an alternative.

Kathy Ackley tried acupuncture to help ease chronic headaches, shoulder and neck pain caused by a sporting injury. After just two treatments, the 43-year-old said, it "dramatically reduced" her pain.

"I have tried the chiropractor, but that is too harsh on my neck. I thought that acupuncture was a lot calmer and I feel 60 per cent better at this point."

People are also turning to herbal medicine. Business at Beijing Tong Ren Tang on George Street has more than doubled since the Chinese herbal store and clinic opened a year ago.

The store, a subsidiary of a Chinese pharmaceutical company founded in 1669, is lined with more than 1000 herbs and tonics, while a glass cabinet houses deer tail and tongue, said to ease joint pain, chronic fatigue and menstrual symptoms. DA small piece of ginseng that has taken 28 years to grow is worth \$2988.

Its managing director, Jianping Ma, said about 30 per cent of the clinic's customers were Anglo-Saxon.