

MODERNISATION

TCM RETAIL: ANCIENT WISDOM, MODERN STRATEGY

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) was always about much more than the medicines the doctor prescribed. It was a holistic approach to complete healing. But rapid change in lifestyles, careers and even new ailments mean that TCM has to keep up with the modern world. Watsons is leading the way.



The ancient art of cupping is practised in a hygienic clinical setting.

A generation of graduates trained under rigorous conditions in Hong Kong's finest universities is finding a new career path in a modern clinical setting with a ground-breaking programme introduced through Watsons pharmacies. Patients are reaping the benefits of TCM as the practitioner's art now accommodates 21st century lifestyles.

MODERN OPTIONS

In late 2013, A S Watson Group (ASW) introduced Chinese medicine services in its health and beauty chain, Watsons, in Hong Kong's Aberdeen district. Consultation and Chinese medicine prescription were offered by certified practitioners in a modern setting. The success of that programme led to its expansion, and today eight Watsons stores in Hong Kong serve patients with traditional Chinese medical treatments and herbal medicine.

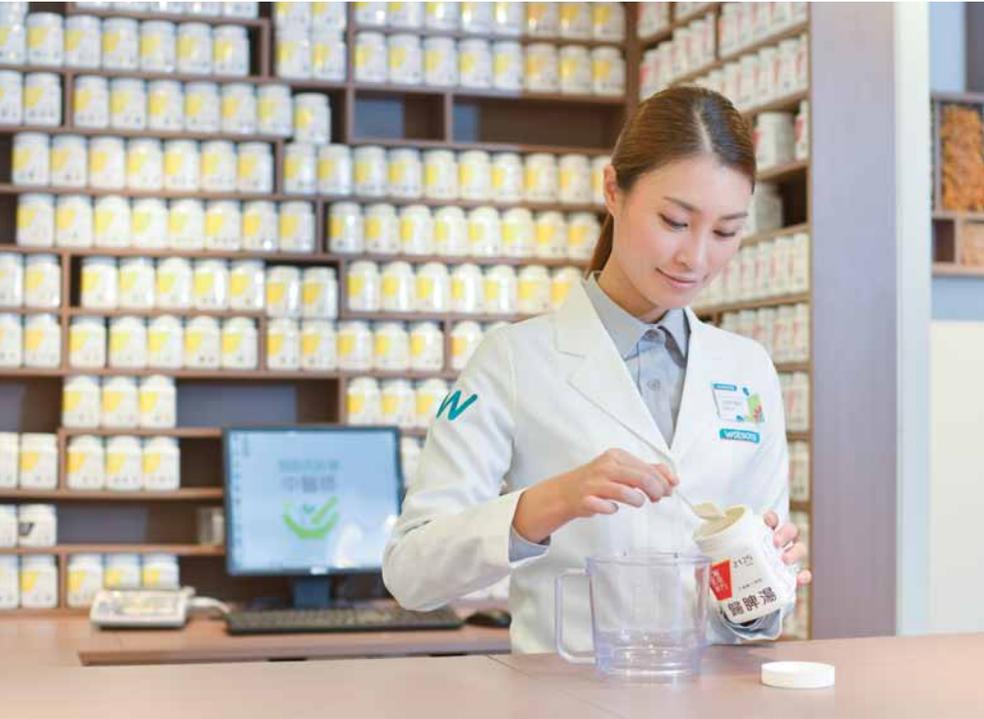
This new medical service broadens the career options of graduates from Chinese medicine schools. While many seeking a career in TCM are motivated by the desire to heal, some are discouraged by the lack of a clear career path, particularly as the industry has been dominated by aging practitioners in antiquated settings. ASW changed that by creating an innovative practice model, allowing healthcare providers to perfect their craft in conjunction with other medical professionals in modern environments, supported by the latest technology.

In 1998, universities in Hong Kong started offering full-time undergraduate degree programmes for Chinese medicine. So far, three universities in Hong Kong offer such degrees: Hong Kong Baptist University, Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong. Graduation requires six years of learning and intensive training. The training at the universities had been upgraded, but the industry has not kept up. Graduates would likely end up in traditional clinics with restricted career prospects. But now, because of ASW, change is afoot.

PROFESSIONAL PROGRESS

Watsons not only offers modern facilities, integrated practice areas, quality medicine and the latest technology, but practitioners have the opportunity to continue their professional development. Watsons' Operations Controller and Chief Pharmacist Margaret Lau explains that Watsons hosts a monthly meeting of the Health Professional Team which consists of pharmacists, dietitians and Chinese medicine practitioners (CMPs) to share and exchange medical experience and skills. The sharing is a way to create synergy among the health professionals, allowing Watsons' patients to receive advice from not one, but three professionals at a time. It is also a chance for the CMPs to share their views on management of common medical problems such as diabetes and high blood pressure from the in-store dietitians and pharmacists. There is a monthly training among Watsons' CMPs on case studies to improve on the services provided to patients.

When Chinese medicine meets the modern pharmacy retail environment, patients win.



“These meetings and training will give our health professionals continued learning and professional development that will benefit their career development,” says Ms Lau.

ELEVATING THE STANDARDS

Measured by sheer volume, TCM clinics are plentiful in Hong Kong. However, service standards is variable, at best. Watsons is changing the industry with a blend of professionalism and a human touch that distinguishes the new business. A former staffer in the Hong Kong government’s public health service, now a Watsons TCM practitioner, CMP Daphne Chong explains that there is more time to spend on each patient, a delight for both the practitioners and, of course, the patients. “We not only provide the treatment but also give advice on diet and take care of the psychological conditions of the patients,” Ms Chong says. “To do this, we need time to talk with the patients in order to understand their needs.”

Given Watsons’ emphasis on service, hiring standards are high. On top of work experience and the licence to practise Chinese medicine, Ms Lau explains that they look for candidates who are outgoing, sociable and can easily relate to patients. Whereas old school practitioners would poke and prod their patients in public view, talking loudly so that all other patients in the queue could hear, a more modern approach is taken at Watsons.

In contrast to the traditional clinic, Watsons conducts counselling inside

a private room to enhance privacy and avoid embarrassment. Practitioners can also conduct physical treatments such as acupuncture and spinal manipulation for chiropractic care inside the room. An x-ray viewer is available for practitioners to have a better understanding of patients’ problems. Watsons has also computerised prescriptions and medical records to track patients’ histories.

Traditional clinics require patients to prepare herbal remedies at home with sometimes multiple steps that can be complex and lead to error. Watsons provides patients with herbs that are already processed into granules. This is more convenient for busy working class Hongkongers and results in a more consistent delivery of dosage.

Another dimension of modernisation is the integration of other modern medical fields. Watsons is currently the only healthcare company in Hong Kong where patients can seek counselling from pharmacists, dietitians and CMPs at the same time. A patient with knee pain due to obesity, for instance, can seek help from dietitians for weight loss, a pharmacist for painkillers and a TCM practitioner for physical therapy such as acupuncture.

ATTRACTIVE ALTERNATIVE

More people are becoming aware of the benefits and the potential of Chinese medicine. At the same time, they are growing wary of over-medicating themselves with heavy-handed treatments for minor issues and discovering the

efficacy of the more subtle approach offered by TCM.

In one instance, a patient came to Watsons for treatment of chest discomfort that had gone undiagnosed elsewhere. Watsons’ new Chinese medicine team discovered a slight displacement of the thoracic intervertebral discs. By correcting the displacement, the problem was solved and the patient did not require the use of drugs.

The demographic trends in the patient base show how TCM is evolving in modern society. Though patients range from toddlers to the elderly, a majority of Hong Kong patients are white collar workers. This is because many office workers face long and inflexible working hours which affect their health. In many jurisdictions, patients are trending younger as well.

In recent years, public hospitals in Hong Kong have begun offering Chinese medicine services, and there has been a double-digit growth in demand. Figures from the public health service show that over a million TCM consultations were sought in Hong Kong’s public hospitals last year. People are seeking out TCM options through modern tools like Facebook and other online channels.

“Traditionally TCM practitioners in Hong Kong carry out their practice in Chinese medicine herbal shops,” says Watsons’ General Manager Diane Cheung. “Most of them are quite small and the surroundings are quite unwelcoming. The situation is changing today. Watsons is introducing a comfortable environment with a contemporary setting, allowing our patients to receive treatment and advice in privacy. We have responded to our patients’ needs and I am confident this business will grow as we expand our clinic network.”

The decision to launch the new programme has proven sound. At a time when Hong Kong is working to develop competitive sectors to stand against aggressive neighbouring cities, ASW is leading the modernisation of TCM and providing new career opportunities for young professionals seeking to heal modern patients with ancient wisdom. □