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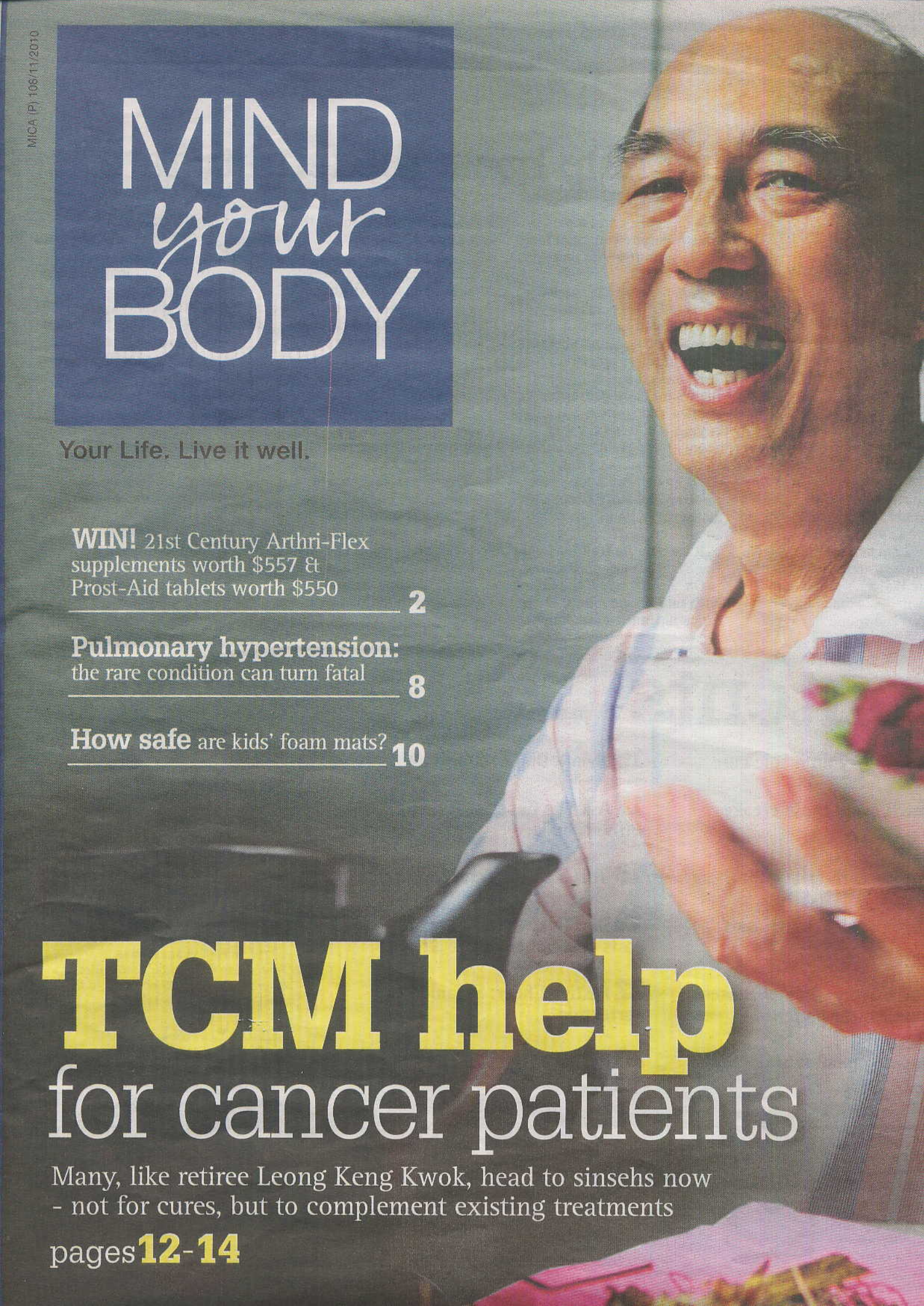
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## TCM help for cancer patients

Many, like retiree Leong Keng Kwok, head to sinsehs now - not for cures, but to complement existing treatments

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Joan Chew

# Chinese sinse more cancer

Each chemotherapy session left the 68-year-old retiree drained. She spent days slumped in bed, getting up only to go to the toilet – about 10 times a day. Those frequent bouts of diarrhoea made her feel as though her legs had turned to jelly.

The retiree, who wanted to be known only as Madam Zhang, said: "I took many pills to stop the diarrhoea but after a while, they did not work anymore."

Halfway through her chemotherapy treatment, she went to a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) practitioner or sinseh, who gave her herbs to consume twice a day.

Her diarrhoea stopped and she could start cooking for her family again. It took just three days after each chemotherapy session for her life to get back to normal.

Sinsehs are seeing more cancer patients these days, as traditional Chinese medicine gains traction in the community as more than just a balm for aches and sprains.

At Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution, close to 10,000 cancer patients passed through its doors last year, up from 6,500 in 2009.

Over at IAG Healthsciences, a TCM clinic at Paragon Medical Suites, Professor Li Fu Min is also seeing more cancer patients.

Out of every 10 patients he sees now, seven or eight are cancer patients, up from fewer than five a few years ago.

TCM is not a recourse just for elderly patients, said Dr Hu Qi Xiang, vice-chief physician at Bao Zhong Tang TCM Centre at Singapore General Hospital.

There are patients as young as four years old and others who fly in from the Philippines and Indonesia to visit him at the clinic.

They take their medical reports along hoping that TCM can complement their existing treatments.

Patients and sinsehs are under no illusions that TCM can replace conventional treatment and medication, which are underpinned by rigorous clinical trials and show concrete evidence in their ability to remove tumours.

Nor can TCM physicians diagnose cancer, although they can look out for symptoms which may raise a suspicion of cancer.

What TCM does, say sinsehs, is build up the body's resistance to tolerate the side effects of chemotherapy better.

The appropriate prescription of herbs can reduce common chemo and radiotherapy side effects such as nausea and appetite loss.

Also, long after the conventional cancer treatments of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy are completed, the use of TCM herbs is said to delay a relapse.

Patients seek relief from the side effects of chemotherapy. Western doctors, however, warn that TCM may sometimes



Mr Lu Ji Hong, a registered TCM physician and acupuncturist at Ma Kuang Healthcare Group, which runs 20 clinics here, summed up the relationship between Western medicine and TCM in treating cancer: "This is an integrative medical approach where the Western medicine kills the tumour and TCM aids in supporting recovery by building up the body."

Ms Tan Kah Hong, a physician who treats cancer patients at Thong Chai Medical Institution, gave this example of how TCM can help cancer patients lead a better life.

Western doctors, she said, may advise patients to wait for the sensitivity in their taste buds to return following radiotherapy for nose cancer, but Chinese herbs can expedite this process.

Such herbs include Chinese yam

**Singapore Thong Chai  
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(*huaishan*) and Glehnia root (*shashen*)

Ms He Qiuling, senior physician at E Yan Sang TCM Clinic in South Bridge Road, added that herbs like Dendrobium (*shihu*) and Dwarf Lilyturf Tuber (*maian*)

# ns see patients

and for pain relief.  
ere with their treatments



ST PHOTOS: TED CHEN

can alleviate mouth dryness, while others like rice-grain sprout (*guya*) and hawthorn fruit (*shanzha*) can increase one's appetite.

However, she cautioned patients against self-prescription, as individuals may require different types of herbs.

For example, two breast cancer patients who have undergone surgery may exhibit different areas of deficiency in their body's constitution. One may have stagnant qi in her liver, while the other may show yin deficiency in her liver and kidney.

Oncologists are open to the use of TCM to help in pain relief, but many still have their reservations about referring patients to a sinseh.

National University Cancer Institute Singapore's Dr Yong Wei Peng said the medical community is unsure about the potential adverse effects from the

combined use of Chinese herbs and Western drugs. This is why he tells his patients to avoid using TCM during the first cycle of any new treatment.

This way, he can better observe treatment side effects.

He said: "Even if TCM may reduce side effects from chemotherapy, it is unclear if it can adversely affect treatment efficacy."

The quality of herbs used may also vary considerably, he said, explaining: "Those acquired from inferior sources may be contaminated with heavy metals and Western drugs."

Dr Toh Han Chong, head of the department of medical oncology at National Cancer Centre Singapore, said the centre is currently talking to reputable TCM institutions to evaluate the effectiveness of TCM on cancer patients.

He believes that such research can provide "concrete answers to TCM and have a potentially significant impact on cancers".

Dr Khoo Kei Siong, deputy medical director of Parkway Cancer Centre (PCC), said he is learning to manage patients on TCM.

Since last March, PCC started a collaboration with Eu Yan Sang – which has 19 TCM clinics islandwide – in which they would refer patients to each other.

So far, there have been more than 10 such referrals.

Both Dr Khoo, who sits on the medical board of Eu Yan Sang, and Dr Toh advise patients to be upfront with their doctors about using TCM.

Dr Khoo has seen patients undergoing chemotherapy who developed kidney or liver dysfunction from TCM use.

These patients had to stop their chemotherapy sessions "to allow the abnormality to resolve", he said.

Others developed skin rash, had symptoms of gastritis and diarrhoea. Though Dr Khoo said it was not possible to be certain that TCM was the culprit, the period when those complications occurred suggested the possibility.

But at the top of the oncologists' list of concerns are patients who refuse curative treatment in favour of TCM. They may miss the opportunity to be cured in the early stages of their cancer when survival rates are higher.

IAG's Prof Li said there are only two instances when patients should rely solely on TCM.

The first is when an aged patient is so weak that he will most likely be unable to withstand chemotherapy. The second is when a patient is at the terminal stage of his cancer and all Western treatments have been exhausted.

He said in Mandarin: "The use of TCM will help to prolong his lifespan and improve his quality of life through pain relief."

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Retiree Leong Keng Kwok finds comfort in drinking his daily brew of herbal medicine which he believes helped to prevent another relapse of colon cancer.

## Herbal brew helped him tolerate chemo side effects

In his own words, September is a "critical month of discovery" for Mr Leong Keng Kwok.

The 65-year-old retiree was first diagnosed with colon cancer in September 2002, after which he had colon surgery followed by almost two months of chemotherapy.

But it was not all smooth sailing after that.

A year later, at Singapore General Hospital (SGH) for a check-up, he learnt that the cancer had relapsed.

The father of three grown children aged 27, 39 and 41 recalled: "I felt terrible emotionally, worse than when I first learnt that I had cancer."

He went through another round of surgery and endured the sessions of chemotherapy again.

He lost his appetite, felt nauseous and lost his hair.

In September 2004, when the cancer relapsed again, he felt it was time to listen to his wife and try traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

He said matter-of-factly: "The first two times I had cancer, I did not see a sinseh but now, with age catching up on me, I thought why not?"

At Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution, he saw physician Tan Kah Hong, who allayed his fears that TCM would interfere with his chemotherapy.

He said that when he started drinking the herbs she prescribed twice a day, he was near the end of

his chemotherapy sessions.

Although the herbal concoction was "very bitter" and drinking it was "terrible", Mr Leong never stopped taking it. This was because he saw how it helped him tolerate the side effects of chemotherapy better.

At first, food tasted bland after chemotherapy and it was all he could do to force himself to take a few mouthfuls.

He said: "After using TCM, I could get right back to eating and food tasted normal within a day."

Previously, without the use of TCM, it would take a few days for him to regain his sense of taste.

Mr Leong also noticed that the stools he passed were "exceptionally dark". This, he believed, was the result of detoxification.

He still consults Western doctors at SGH and is cancer-free today.

Using TCM is not all that unusual for Mr Leong. As a child, his father would take him to TCM clinics for minor ailments like coughs and colds.

He believes the Chinese herbs played a part in healing him physically.

He said with a laugh: "I still don't enjoy drinking the herbal soup, but I feel comfortable after I drink a bowl once a day.

"It's like my comfort zone, much like how you return home to eat local fare after an overseas trip."

# Herbal pills could not shrink

**W**hen Indonesian Iswandi Agusirwan, 59, was diagnosed with nasopharyngeal cancer in 2003, he was less afraid of dying than of having to go through chemotherapy.

The assistant director of a travel agency in Indonesia recalled: "I heard from others how hopeless they became after chemotherapy, with hair loss and bad skin."

The stories were enough to give him nightmares, so he refused to go to a Western-trained doctor.

For more than two months, Mr Iswandi popped 60 traditional Chinese herbal pills daily. To his dismay, it had no effect on him.

On his friend's recommendation, he checked himself into a "herbal clinic" which made him go through an unusual regimen.

In the first two weeks, Mr Iswandi drank only water "specially treated" by the clinic. Food was not allowed.

He downed 50 herbal tablets thrice a day and had to soak himself in hot baths of 38 deg C for 30 minutes each day, which purportedly helped to get rid of his cancer cells.

His diet for the next month comprised of vegetables like broccoli and carrots, making him so weak he could hardly walk.

When asked how he pulled through, Mr Iswandi said: "I forced myself not to think about my hunger, but to focus on getting rid of my sickness."

He also had trouble sleeping as he was wracked with pain emanating from his neck, head and nose.

Mr Iswandi spent more than S\$10,000 on this treatment which "came to nothing in the end", he said.

Initially, the lump on the right side of his neck was as small as a peanut, but ballooned to the size of a tennis ball by the time he checked out of the clinic, said his elder sister, Ms Mariani Agusirwan.

**FEB 5, 2004:** When Mr Iswandi first came to Singapore to seek treatment, his tumour was protruding from the right side of his neck.



**FEB 27, 2004:** The tumour subsided after three sessions of chemotherapy treatment at Parkway Cancer Centre administered by oncologist, Dr Ang Peng Tiam.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MR ISWANDI AGUSIRWAN

## Different approaches to cancer

### WESTERN MEDICINE:

To Western-trained doctors, cancer is the result of cells that grow uncontrollably in the body.

They form masses of tissue called tumours which interfere with the digestive, nervous and circulatory systems.

The treatment methods will focus on surgically removing the tumour from the body and killing all other cancerous cells through radiation and chemotherapy.

### CHINESE MEDICINE:

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) regards illnesses like cancer as the result of internal disharmony within the body.

Mr Lu Ji Hong, a registered TCM physician and acupuncturist at Ma Kuang Healthcare Group, which runs 20 clinics here, explained: "A weakened body accumulates evilness which disrupts the smooth flow of qi."

Ms He Qiuling, senior physician at Eu Yan Sang TCM Clinic at South Bridge Road, added that when qi (vital life

energy) and blood are not flowing freely in the body, this stagnation will give rise to tumour growth.

So the key to tackling cancer, say TCM practitioners, is to restore the body's balance by regulating the immune system and strengthening the body's resistance through the use of herbs.

Ms Sun Hui Li, senior physician at Bao Zhong Tang TCM Centre at Singapore General Hospital, said: "TCM considers the person as a whole, whereas Western medicine offers localised treatment."

# Check his tumour

“

**I heard from others how hopeless they became after chemotherapy, with hair loss and bad skin.**

MR ISWANDI AGUSIRWAN, (left), 59, on why he refused to see a Western-trained doctor initially

She said over the phone from Indonesia: “It looked like it was going to burst any time. The family was so afraid.”

She then travelled with him to Singapore to seek treatment at Parkway Cancer Centre with oncologist Ang Peng Tiam, whom they had heard of from friends.

At the clinic, Dr Ang’s first priority was to build Mr Iswandi’s confidence towards Western cancer treatment. He showed him pictures of cancer patients before and after their treatments, with many of them looking well.

Dr Ang saw that Mr Iswandi’s cancer was confined to his nasopharynx – the back of his neck – and the lymph nodes in his neck. He said: “The cure rate was not high, at about 40 to 50 per cent, but it was definitely worth a try.”

Dr Ang also put him on a less intensive chemotherapy programme so that he would experience fewer side effects.

Within a month, the tumour had subsided until it was no longer obvious.

Mr Iswandi continued with chemotherapy and radiation therapy for another six months and now returns to Singapore occasionally for follow-up visits.

He advised cancer patients: “Go directly to a Western-trained doctor to cure your cancer. Although other forms of treatment may help you, they cannot give you a full recovery.”

All stories by Joan Chew

