

For 99 years, Thai traditional doctors have been forbidden from treating patients given there was a legal provision to punish those who resisted. In 2012, the first Thai traditional hospital will open in Sakon Nakhon Province, to be followed by nine other pilot hospitals in nine provinces with the aim to set national standards in providing treatments, research and training. This is a dream project to revive traditional wisdom to serve as an alternative option for the people and the survival for the country.

Time for the First Thai Traditional Medicine Hospitals

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From death to revival

Thai traditional medicine has long been a part of Thailand's healing culture. It has gone through an age of blossoming in earlier times¹ as well as an age of withering when Westerners brought their goods, medicine, values, culture and cannon-mounted caravels to Siam just about a hundred years ago. In particular, the 1913 law "to abolish Thai traditional medicine and prohibit traditional doctors from treating patients"², followed by other punitive laws, made Thai traditional medicine almost extinct. Traditional medicine textbooks were lost, burned in fire or stole to be sold to other countries.



In 1977 the WHO meeting in Russia recommended the use of herbal remedy and folk wisdom. This became the beginning of primary healthcare in Thailand. In 1982, Professor Dr.Uai Ketsing founded a foundation to revive Thai traditional medicine named Ayurveda College (Chiwaka Komarapaj) to produce applied traditional doctors with a 3-year curriculum. For this reason, he is known as the “Father of Applied Traditional Thai Medicine.”

From then on, Thai traditional medicine slowly regained its life. The 7th and 8th National Economic and Social Development Plans required health promotion and revival of traditional medicine, herbs and massage to accompany modern medicine. Thai traditional pharmacology and medicine were given support with no less than 2% of national health budgets³ and have seen considerable progresses and structuralisation in the past decade. The “Center for Thai Traditional Medicine and Pharmacology” in 1989 has evolved into “Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine” in 1993 and the “Department of Thai Traditional Medicine and Alternative Medicine” in 2002.

Plethora of support measures

In order to integrate Thai traditional medicine into the national health system, it has received support as follow:

(1) The number of Thai herbs which can be dispensed in general hospitals in the 2010 National List of Essential Medicines increased to 71. Civil servants and the general population have these costs covered with their health security entitlements.⁴

(2) “Herb protection plan in reserved areas 2012–2014” has been issued to protect the source locations of important herbs in 7 national parks.⁵

(3) More than 50,000 folk doctors with experience and community confidence received certification (not a medical license) to ensure continuity of their knowledge and prevent knowledge theft and exploitation by other countries.⁶

(4) Thai traditional medicine and alternative medicine have been promoted in 10, 851 hospitals throughout the Ministry of Public Health system especially for health promotion, disease prevention, basic rehabilitation and treatment of chronic patients, the elderly and the disabled and the use of 71 herbs in National List of Essential Medicines to replace and reduce the use of Western medicine saving the country more than 5 billion baht per year.⁷

(5) The latest recommendation in 2011 is to set up the “The Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine” run by a committee with representation from the government and private sectors, and the “Herb Production Central Plant” to raise the standard of small-scale herb producers to compete with China and India, the world’s top two herb producers.⁸

These support measures are steps in the right direction to revive Thai traditional medicine which has long been shunned and removed from daily life. Another step which may be considered a ‘new dawn’ to further enhance status of traditional medicine for wide public recognition is the establishment of the Traditional Thai Medicine Hospitals.

A New dawn

During the past decade, Thai traditional medicine has gained increased attention with the paradigm shift towards more self-reliance after the

economic crisis. As Thailand's national health expenses increased significantly, especially for drugs, imported drugs that account for two third of the expenses at more than 130 billion baht during 2009–2011⁹ began to be questioned for their quality, side effects, high prices due to patents¹⁰ and marketing tricks to exploit consumers¹¹. The increased health consciousness of the population also helped push developments.

But Thai traditional medicine still makes up an insignificant part of an average hospital's operation. Herbal use accounts for only 1.8% of all drugs.¹²

As a result, an initiative emerged to set up hospitals to provide a full range of Thai traditional medicines. These places will also allow an exchange of knowledge among traditional doctors, students and academics on how to improve effectiveness and a research center to concretely promote and conserve Thai traditional remedies and herbs. A prototype is the 30-bed Thai traditional hospital in Sakon Nakhon Province's Waritchaphoom District. In addition to the patients' ward, there are also areas for growing herbs. The ground-breaking ceremony to begin construction took place on 27th March 2010 and the construction is expected to be complete in 2012.

This hospital is run by the Committee on Local Wisdom for Health appointed by the National Health Committee. Article 60 of the Constitution of National Health System BE 2552, under the National Health Act BE 2550, envisions a prototype Thai Traditional Medicine Hospital with standard in services, research and training in each region.¹³ This Sakon Nakhon hospital is the prototype for the Northeastern Region.

This hospital is interesting because it was not born out of government policy, operation or budget but from the traditional "community and temple and school" collaboration. Sakon Nakhon

has all the aspiration and potentials, with 1,368 folk doctors, 43 academics in the field, 108 licensed practitioners, and natural endowment of herb diversity in the HRH Princess Sirindhorn-initiated Plant Genetic Conservation project as well as in Phu Pan mountain.¹⁴

Out of the 98 million baht construction costs, 23 million came from the donation of venerable Luang Pu Fab Subhatto, abbot of Dong Wai Forest Temple. Built on an 58-rai area of Raja Mangala Institute of Technology, Sakon Nakhon Campus, it will be used to train students in Thai traditional medicine Studies and later registered as a foundation.

Nine other pilot hospitals

With the advance made by Sakon Nakhon's civil society, the Ministry of Public Health upped its game by selecting nine other hospitals to become full-scale Thai traditional medicine hospitals. These hospitals will be tasked with providing treatments for all patients regardless of health security entitlements with a blend of Thai traditional medicine and modern medicine depending on the patient's choice using 209 single-herb as well as multiple-herb regimens in and outside the National List of Essential Medicines.

These nine hospitals are Chantaburi's Phrapokklao Hospital, Suphanburi's U-Thong Hospital, Sa Kaew's Wang Nam Yen Hospital and Wattana Nakhon Hospital, Sisaket's Khun Harn Hospital, Phrae's Somdet Yupparat Hospital, Chiang Rai's Thoeng Hospital, Suratthani's Tha Rong Chang Hospital and Bangkok's Institute for Thai Traditional Medicine. Each has a development budget of 1 million baht and 18 additional staff members who are Thai traditional doctors, applied traditional doctors, pharmacologists and professional nurses.

These projects are to be evaluated periodically so as to ensure improvement and if well-responded to by the public they will be developed into exclusively Thai traditional medicine centers of excellence to be replicated throughout the country.¹⁵

Thai traditional medicine seems to be enjoying increasing popularity as the value of herbs used in Ministry of Public Health facilities increased to 391 million baht in 2009. Sixteen tertiary-level educational institutions¹⁶ offer courses on Thai traditional medicine and applied Thai traditional medicine whilst several public and private hospitals also offer Thai traditional medicine as an option.

Not a rosy path

Although these developments appear positive, there are concerns about problems and challenges which may undermine further growth. Several of these concerns are considerable challenges to be overcome.

(1) *Theft of knowledge and materials.*

Herbs and local wisdom are important resources to be protected against theft by other countries, especially those with technical superiorities which can use intellectual property rights to claim these for themselves. However, there's little recognition of the importance of these resources and the Thai authorities have no protection mechanisms for these national assets. There are already lessons from the cases of jasmine rice, *Croton sublyratus* Kurz, *Pueraria* species, mangosteen, and most recently, Thai yoga.¹⁷

Kanchana Deeviset, director of the Office for the Protection of Thai Traditional Medicine Wisdom and Herbs at the Department for Development of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine in the Ministry of Public Health stated that Thai traditional knowledge faces a risk of being patented by other countries so there was a need for vigilance

on thirteen herbs such as mangosteen, *Croton sublyratus* Kurz, *Curcuma Longa* and two branches of Thai traditional knowledge, namely Thai traditional massage and Thai yoga. Despite the Protection and Promotion of Traditional Thai Medicine Wisdom Act B.E. 2542 there are no relevant laws or ministerial regulations to register intellectual properties and protect herbs and Thai traditional knowledge¹⁸ and the Department of Intellectual Property only demands that relevant agencies compile lists of Thailand's local knowledge and make a database to facilitate their protection.¹⁹

(2) Popular beliefs Thai traditional medicine needs to gain wider public trust as a legitimate alternative to modern medicine especially when the latter fails to deal sufficiently with newly emerged cross-border diseases such as SARS, avian influenza, and 2009 flu. Enhancing treatment effectiveness of herbs and gaining public trust are important steps.

(3) Doctors' biases All Thai doctors have been educated in modern medicine with completely different notions for diagnosis, etiology and treatment from those of Thai traditional medicine. These doctors are therefore, likely to espouse the biases of modern medicine in the belief that it can be scientifically proven, is better and more genuine and accurate. The doctors are likely to see alternative medicine as just 'folk beliefs' or only as 'augmentative treatments.'

Modern Thai doctors also have little herbal knowledge and don't believe that traditional medicine can effectively cure diseases. As most doctors don't have the expertise, it's no surprise that they are unlikely to prescribe such cures," explained Dr.Somsak Lolekha, President of the Medical Council.²⁰

Dr.Sommai Thongprasert, a doctor and herb expert, said that "Even if the public is more open to Thai traditional medicine, there's still rejection



and resistance of Thai traditional medicine and other alternative medicines among doctors in hospitals.”

“When you request herbal treatments at the hospital, the doctor may scold you. Some of my breast cancer patients go to the hospital and the doctor refused to give them an ultrasound because they had been treated by Thai traditional doctors. There’s a considerable resistance. There’s a period when the Ministry of Public Health ordered every hospital to grow herbs. Now they are all gone. It’s meaningless anyway, as the doctors don’t prescribe them,” added Dr.Sommai.²¹

Alternative for survival

Establishing official Thai traditional medicine hospitals is an important step to create more treatment options for the Thai population. The country’s survival may be promoted through reducing dependency on Multinational Pharmacy Firms and preventing possible Western medicine shortages in the future. During the Second World War, modern medicine had to be made from local herbs due to shortages.

Most importantly, the establishment of Thai traditional medicine hospitals and enhancement of Thai traditional medicine will help eliminate biases and open minds for alternative medicines which were once part of human civilisations.

