In the past two years, the development of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has stimulated wide interest in Hong Kong. This interest originated from two consultancy studies carried out in 1996/97 in the evaluation of Hong Kong's biotechnology position. In the so-called MIT study (carried out by Hong Kong, S Berger and R K Lester editors, Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), three major areas of biotechnology were evaluated; viz. biopharmaceuticals, generic drugs and TCM. It was recommended that Hong Kong has the greatest strength in developing TCM and the reasons cited are: 1) Hong Kong has the academic and cultural knowhow in developing TCM; 2) competition in TCM is less keen at the international level; 3) health supplement markets have good potential; and 4) Hong Kong has ready access to China’s R&D in TCM. A similar conclusion was reached by the second study (Biotechnology Focus Study by HKIB and the Industry Department).

Since the handover in 1997, Hong Kong’s economy has slowed down due to the Asian financial crisis. To seek new opportunities for economic growth, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), Mr Tung Chee Hwa, is keen to develop a more innovative and technology-based economy. In his 1998 policy address, Mr. Tung earmarked TCM as one of the target areas for this new economy. In the following year, the Director General of Industry, Mr. Francis Ho, echoed this call by putting up an ambitious ten-year plan for Hong Kong to develop a world-class TCM industry.

Stimulated by the initiatives of the SAR Government, the business community responded positively. Major corporations in Hong Kong began to talk about investing in Chinese medicine and plans were drawn up to develop a Chinese medicine port challenging the size of the Cyber Port for the IT industry. In the universities, new initiatives were made to promote TCM research and education. TCM was in the headline news every day.

There is no doubt that TCM has stirred up a lot of excitement in Hong Kong. It has given an old industry new life and new direction. How this industry will develop in the future depends on a lot of factors and what is being done today will be instrumental in the future. In the past two years, Hong Kong has been step-by-step building the foundation of such an industry. Government, universities and private companies have gotten together to seek the best course of action. In a free economy like Hong Kong’s, the government can never dictate the direction of investment; however, in the case of TCM, its market potential will be the main driving force to congeal Hong Kong into making it into a successful story. In this Special Report, we have invited a number of experts from Hong Kong to describe some of the activities they have been involved in developing a TCM industry.
A Blessing in Disguise in a Report which Relegates Traditional Chinese Medicine to the Least Favored Status?

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In November 2000, the UK House of Lords Sub-Committee on Science and Technology published its report after a year-long deliberation on complementary and alternative medicines. Depending upon your belief and experience, the report is either a retrograde step or it is a forward-looking report which will send a powerful kick to the backside of: those who choose to argue that nothing equates the thousands of years that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has been practiced; and those who prefer to bury their heads in the sand hoping the matter will eventually blow away whenever they have to make a decision. The report still makes a grim reading even for those complementary therapists including TCM practitioners who view the report as an opportunity to overhaul the industry to meet the modern needs. If the orthodox clinical trials are not appropriate it is our duty to offer alternative methodology. If necessary, we should convene an international forum to agree on acceptable clinical trial methodologies.

The report found all the therapies under consideration not up to scratch because they do not possess the body of research evidence to support either their claims or practices. The evidence offered was: Group 1 is headed as “Professionally Organized Alternative Therapies”; Group 2 is “Complementary Therapies”; and Group 3 is “Alternative Disciplines — Long-established and traditional system of healthcare or other alternative disciplines.” A diplomatic verbal wrestling with the grouping exercise is evident and TCM is relegated to the third or the least favored category status.

Group 1 included Osteopathy and Chiropractic which are already recognized and have a statutory regulatory body. Fair enough, the two practices are professionally organized because the statutory regulatory body ensures this happened. It is less apparent why Western acupuncture (practiced by orthodox medical practitioners and qualified professional health carers) is assigned to the most favored status but not TCM acupuncture which together with herbal medicine is assigned to the least favored status (Group 3 — Alternative disciplines). The committee acknowledged that “Acupuncture — originating from China, acupuncture involves inserting small needles into various points in the body to stimulate nerve impulses. Traditional acupuncture is based on the idea of ‘Qi’ (vital energy) which is said to travel around the body along ‘meridian’ which acupuncture points affect. Western acupuncture uses the same needling technique but is based on affective nerve impulses and the central nervous system; acupuncture may be used as an anaesthetic-agent and also as an analgesic.”
The report also concluded that:

- there is either “scanty or no evidence” in TCM to support its claims of efficacy and effectiveness;
- the existing TCM curricular contents are varied in depth and breadth to “ensure that the public are protected from incompetent and dangerous practitioners”;
- there is a major issue surrounding the quality and safety of the TCM products.

The report recommended that (a) the Medicines Control Agency (MCA), a FDA equivalent assist the public identify regulated products more clearly; (b) MCA reinforce the law against illegal or misleading labeling rigorously.

This report is brought to your attention because of its possible major impact on TCM outside China — to stimulate discussion, reflection and action to remove the “notice” the report has placed upon TCM. Just consider the following facts:

- In the West, the philosophies of the TCM and other complementary medicine are both complex and difficult to understand and to manage from the public safety perspective because they are less amenable to the western scientific principles;
- TCM and the complementary medicines are not best loved or welcomed by the fraternity in the orthodox medicine and pharmaceutical companies;
- because this is an authoritative and government-led report it can be easily used as a legitimate tool for any interested party to neutralise the growth of TCM and complementary medicines;
- the power of MCA is clearly enhanced;
- European Council will also take heart from this report as it drafts its directive on traditional medicinal products.

Whatever your views and wherever you practice, the wake up call is sounded. So far, this report is the biggest challenge to all involved in the TCM industry.

Reference:
House of Lords Sub-Committee on Science and Technology (2000): Complementary and Alternative Medicine, HL Paper 123, November, the Stationery Office, London