Former US President Reagan Open to TCM Treatment

The office of former US president, Ronald Reagan, has recently expressed interest in an offer by a Chinese pharmaceutical company to treat his Alzheimer's disease.

A team of physicians is now being assembled to travel to the US following the positive response. A neurologist and a specialist in senile dementia are likely to be on the team.

Mr Shen Xiangxi, general manager of Hangkang Pharmaceutical based in Hangzhou, the capital city of eastern China's Zhejiang province, said that Mr Reagan's office has signalled that it was receptive to the idea. In a previous open letter to Mrs Nancy Reagan, the company offered to help improve the former president's condition with traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

Earlier, Mr Reagan's office has expressed interest in the offer and hoped to hold a detailed discussion with the company soon. According to feedback from the office, Mr Reagan's condition is fast deteriorating. The former president, now 90, disclosed in 1994 that he was suffering from Alzheimer's, a degenerative brain disease.

First Singapore TCM Research Symposium

The first Singapore Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Research Symposium will be held on 12 November 2001. This symposium is organized to showcase the various TCM research activities in Singapore.

In conjunction with the symposium, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH)'s National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) and Johns Hopkins University will be organizing a Workshop on Clinical Research Methodology and Grantsmanship on 13 and 14 November 2001. This practical workshop is the first NIH NCCAM workshop held outside USA to acquaint researchers with the ins and outs of applying for research grant funding from the NIH.

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General Information and Statistics

Eastern China’s Zhejiang Province to Set Up Biomedical Park

Eastern China’s Zhejiang province is to establish a park specializing in biomedical research and production in the Hangzhou Economic Development Zone, located in Hangzhou, the capital city of the province.

An official with the project said that about 60 pharmaceutical plants and research institutes will enter the park, which is expected to set up a system of production and research within the next five years.

Pharmaceutical enterprises should see in advance the challenges from overseas competition when China enters the World Trade Organization.

Sources said that by 2005, the park’s industrial output is expected to grow steadily as the demands for medical care remains one of the major forces behind China’s economic growth. However, pharmaceutical enterprises should see in advance the challenges from overseas competition when China enters the World Trade Organization.

Experts believe that China ought to strengthen its ability to develop new drugs and strive to upgrade the quality of medical products to become competitive in the international market.

India’s Wheat Exports Hit New Lows

India's wheat exports have dropped again and hit new lows despite increasing international demand. According to market sources, many countries were not interested in purchasing wheat from India due to the reported presence of karnal bunt fungus in Indian wheat. As a result, wheat exports in July dropped to below 100 000 tonne.
Steady Development of China’s Pharmaceutical Industry

China’s pharmaceutical industry developed steadily in the first four months of this year, according to the State Economic and Trade Commission.

• Sustained increase of production

The national pharmaceutical industrial output value amounted to RMB84.1 billion (US$10.1 billion) in the first four months of this year, an increase of 15.5 percent over the same period last year. The industrial added value totalled RMB22.5 billion (US$2.72 billion), up 17.4 percent.

The industrial sales value amounted to RMB62.5 billion (US$7.5 billion), up 14.4 percent; the sales ratio was 93 percent, the same as in the same last year period.

• Steady increase in sales revenue

The sales revenue came up to RMB61 billion (US$7.34 billion) in the January-April period, up 13 percent over the same period last year, with RMB31 billion (US$3.74 billion) from state owned or state controlled enterprises, up 8.8 percent.

By the end of April, finished products in stock were valued at RMB21.5 billion (US$2.60 billion), up 5.6 percent over the year-earlier period, including RMB11.7 billion (US$1.42 billion) produced by state owned or controlled enterprises, up one percent.

• Fast increase in profit

The pharmaceutical enterprises posted a profit totaling RMB4.4 billion (US$531 million) in the first four months of this year, up 24 percent over the same period last year. Included were RMB2.1 billion (US$253 million) by state owned and controlled enterprises, up 24.4 percent. The profitability was 7.21 percent.

The profits of pharmaceutical industrial enterprises have kept increasing since last year. Statistics show that 65 percent of the profits came from coastal economically developed areas, but the top ten profit-makers were distributed in central and western China. They were Jilin, Heilongjiang, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Guangxi, Hainan, Chongqing, Sichuan, Yunnan and Shanxi provinces. The only province which incurred a loss was Gansu.

• Increase in losses

By the end of April this year, the number of pharmaceutical enterprises which incurred a loss accounted for 27.6 percent of the total, 7.4 percent less than in the same period last year; but the amount of losses totaled RMB988 million (US$119 million), up 26.7 percent.

• Recovery of enterprise accounts receivable and normal assets/liability ratio

By the end of April, accounts receivable has amounted to RMB50.18 billion (US$6.06 billion), up 11.6 percent over the same period last year. The assets/liabilities ratio was 55 percent, four percent less than in the year-earlier period.

Australia’s New AIDS Vaccine to Enter Human Trials Next Year

A new vaccine, developed by Australian scientists, to protect against HIV and AIDS will enter the first phase of human trials next year. The vaccine will be tested in Sydney, in about 50 people who do not have HIV.

Experiments conducted in monkeys showed that the vaccine is 100 percent effective in preventing the monkeys from developing HIV.

However, the trial will only determine whether the vaccine causes any side effects, and whether it causes a reaction from the immune system. But whether the immune reaction is sufficient to protect a person against HIV will only be assessed at a later stage.

Experiments conducted in monkeys showed that the vaccine is 100 percent effective in preventing the monkeys from developing HIV, and did not cause any side effects. An earlier trial in humans using the booster part of the vaccine also did not show any side effects.
Singapore Continues to Face Shortage of Nurses

Each year on Nurses’ Day, 12 May in Singapore, not as many nurses celebrate the occasion as health-care providers would like. There is still the continuing shortage of nurses in Singapore.

A wide range of measures aimed at preventing nurses here from quitting their jobs, as well as attracting new recruits, seems to have had little overall impact on Singapore’s shortage of nursing professionals.

Last September, the Ministry of Health said the nation was short of at least 650 nurses, and needed to hire an additional 3000 by 2004 to work at nursing homes and community hospitals that are expected to open over the next few years. Pay reviews, better career options, increased overseas recruitment and a scheme to encourage ex-nurses to return to work, were some of the measures introduced in the past 14 months.

Nurses’ paycheques increased by an average of 13 percent in June 2000, and 6 percent this June. Recently, a new clinical career track was announced which enables nurses to advance in their careers without having to teach or join management ranks.

But these measures have not stemmed the tide of nurses leaving the profession. Numbers fluctuate, but according to the ministry, Singapore has a shortfall of between 650 and 880 nurses, and the current number, 13 500, is much the same as it was last year.

So, what has been done?

• **Foreign Talent**

The number of foreign nurses has risen by 20 percent, from 3936 last year to 4773 at the end of July this year. The majority of these nurses come from countries such as the Philippines, India, China and Myanmar.

The National Kidney Foundation (NKF) has been recruiting nurses from overseas for at least the last six years. Foreign nurses now make up 85 percent of the 255 nurses working in the NKF dialysis centres.

Miss Suzie Burford, head of the NKF’s Institute of Nursing Education and Research, said that foreign nurses can receive further training, and support to help them pass their registration examinations.

Unfortunately, such measures make foreign nurses attractive to other countries. In the first six months of the year, 53 nurses handed in their notices, compared with 60 for the whole of 2000. The majority of resignees were foreign nurses. Miss Burford said that, while nurses do not need to give reasons for leaving, informal feedback reveals that they leave to work in Britain.

“British hospitals offer salaries that we cannot compete with,” she said. “They also make it easier for them to bring their immediate families, which is a major incentive.”

A Health Ministry survey of 2000 former nurses carried out in 1999 indicated that 500 were willing to return to the ranks. As a result, a scheme was announced last September to bring nurses back to the fold. But so far, only 56 are back.

Speaking recently to reporters, Singapore’s Minister for Health, Lim Hng Kiang, admitted that the ministry and healthcare providers can do more, adding that hospitals and healthcare clusters will have to be more flexible if they want to attract a significant number of nurses back to work.

Singapore Health Services (SingHealth) and the National Healthcare Group (NHG), which jointly administer public hospitals and healthcare facilities, said they are improving working conditions to attract and retain nurses.

Flexi-hour schemes have been introduced in NHG hospitals, while SingHealth has said it will give nurses the option of flexible working hours. But sometimes it is not easy to do this. The Singapore General Hospital (SGH) has not used the new scheme to bring back ex-nurses, but said it has contacted 16 former nurses through the Health Ministry. SGH said that most of these nurses have requested for part-time work or non-rotating shifts.
“Where operationally feasible, we do offer part-time work,” said an SGH spokesman. “Unfortunately, patient care involves a round-the-clock commitment, so we cannot do away with shift duties.”

• **Time to Act**

Miss Susie Kong, president of the Singapore Nurses Association, believes that Singapore could manage with fewer registered nurses if their workloads are reorganized.

“We need to change the scope of their work so they can focus more on critical care, rather than on mundane daily tasks which can be done by healthcare assistants,” she said.

“We need to improve nursing quality here, particularly in areas of leadership, so they can better supervise and train other healthcare workers.”

The Minister for Health agrees that there is a need for healthcare assistants to take over jobs like dressing and bathing patients, and has even called for patients’ relatives to help so that nurses can concentrate on areas which require more skill.

So far, SingHealth says it has not made any major changes along these lines.

But the Home Nursing Foundation is nevertheless considering it. The foundation’s chief executive officer, Mr Cheong Kah Meng, said it is looking at categorizing patient cases into three groups: severe, moderate and mild. Senior nurses would care for the most severe cases, then transfer patients to the next level as they improve.

Such changes could help to ensure that experienced nurses focus on the kind of challenging work that requires all their clinical skills and knowledge — keeping them satisfied and on the job, as well as increasing recruitment.

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**More Chinese Couples Hope to Store Embryos for Future Use**

Years ago in China, many sterile couples turned to special techniques to help them realize their dreams of having a baby of their own. Now more and more healthy couples in Guangzhou, the capital of south China’s Guangdong province, want to store their embryos for future use.

Many couples have said that they are at present very busy with their work and have no time to have a child. So they hope that their sperm and egg cells can be kept in storage for now and they will be able to take them out when they want to have a baby in the future.

Dr. Fang Cong at the No. 1 Affiliated Hospital of Guangzhou Zhongshan Medical University, said that it is not a dream for a couple to freeze their embryos for future use. The technique to freeze embryos has been put into clinical use since the 1980s. The reproduction center of the hospital has been successful in freezing embryos for one to five years and then “waking them up” to grow test tube babies.

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**Bioscience Symposium Opens in Taiwan**

Over 1000 participants from the Asia-Pacific region, North America and Western Europe attended the 9th International Symposium of the Society of Chinese Bioscientists in America (SCBA), held at the Academia Sinica, Taiwan, from August 6 to 10.

President Chen Shui-bian spoke at the opening ceremony of the symposium. In his address, Chen promised the government’s full and urgent attention to the development of...
biotechnology in Taiwan, which is to be promoted through supportive legislation and the development of the new biotech-oriented science parks on the island. He said biotechnology is the most important industry in terms of Taiwan’s future economic development. He also expressed the concern that the number of the scientists involved in biotechnology research in Taiwan, at 4000, compares badly with the number at work in the fields in other advanced countries.

Welcoming participants to the symposium, the National Health Research Institute president Wu Cheng-wen said, “New diseases and health problems continue to emerge. In this so-called ‘post-genomic era’, bioscientists have to think the unthinkable, imagine the unimaginable. We cannot overemphasize the impact of science and technology on our daily lives, but we shall not be daunted by the formidable tasks human beings are still facing.”

The five-day symposium was jointly sponsored by the Society of Chinese Bioscientists in North America (SCBA), Academia Sinica and the National Health Research Institute (NHRI). The scope of the symposium, involving keynote speeches, 31 sub-symposia and 288 paper presentations, is wide-ranging, covering the fields of biotechnology theory and applications, with a predominance of papers addressing medical-related issues. Participants included Professor Steve Chu, winner of the Nobel Prize in physics in 1997; Professor David Ho, who has built an international reputation through innovative AIDS-therapy work.

The SCBA was established in 1985 and has now over 3000 members. It aims to promote and advance work in the biological sciences, improve the skills and opportunities of its members, and foster professional contact and communications within the field.

Trends & Prospects

The Futuristic Hospital in Singapore

While Singapore has begun to embrace advanced technology in medicine, most medical experts feel that more can be done to deliver comprehensive, cost-effective healthcare to patients. With technology as the key enabler, more patient-friendly work processes can be designed.

It will also be possible to link up all the various departments — X-ray, laboratory, rehabilitation — and external healthcare providers to provide an integrated view of patient information.

Mr Alvin Ong, director of information management at Singapore’s Alexandra Hospital said that the hospital of the future will be wired up and all information systems will be integrated. Patients will be able to obtain services without being physically present and can interact with their care providers via the Internet, WAP phones. Mr Ong estimated that Singapore’s use of IT in medicine is about 75 percent, which is less integrated than some hospitals in America and Europe but better than most in Asia, except Japan.

Patients will be able to obtain services without being physically present and can interact with their care providers via the Internet, WAP phones.

Dr Ho Choon Hou, head of Medfolders at NovaHealth of Singapore said that IT in technology must satisfy the three following conditions before that implementation or application can be considered successful:• cut down escalating medical costs;• be more user-friendly for doctors and patients;• allow for patient-centered consulting.

But there are barriers to embracing patient-oriented technology in hospitals. One barrier slowing down the use of technology in hospitals is reluctance on the part of doctors. Others are the lack of legislation to protect patient security and confidentiality.