



Some formulations used in traditional Chinese medicines have been developed over thousands of years.

to treat diseases”, rather than as a regular supplement. He says more research is needed into how to ensure the safe use of the potentially toxic substance. Overall, Lao is not concerned about safety issues with traditional medicines because “unlike Western drug development, these herbal formulas have been used for hundreds and thousands of years”, he says.

But Li Qingchen, a paediatric surgeon at the Harbin Children’s Hospital and a well-known critic of TCMs, says the recent recalls of remedies show that current safety measures aren’t adequate. He says doctors need to inform the public about some of the dangers associated with traditional medicines, but that most are unwilling to speak out against them. “Few doctors would dare to publicly criticize TCMs,” he says. Li thinks that the government’s promotion of TCMs will make it harder for scientists to criticize the drugs “because the matter gets escalated to a political level and open discussions become restricted”.

CRITICISM MUTED

With strong government support for the alternative-medicines industry, Chinese censors have been quick to remove posts from the Internet that question the efficacy of TCMs. On 23 October, an article on a medical news site that called for closer attention to be paid to the risks of aristolochic acid was removed from social-media site WeChat. The story had been viewed more than 700,000 times in three days.

Debate over TCMs has been silenced before in China. Last year, a Beijing think tank — the Development Research Center of the State Council — proposed banning the practice of extracting Asiatic black bear bile, another common ingredient in TCMs. The think tank’s report questioned the remedy’s efficacy and suggested using synthetic alternatives. It was removed from the think tank’s website after the China Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which supports the

development of TCMs, called it biased and demanded an apology.

As well as reducing regulations for TCMs, the Chinese government has made it easier for someone to become a doctor of traditional medicine and for hospitals that use the approach to open. Since July 2017, students studying traditional medicine no longer need to pass the national medical exams based on Western medicine. Instead, traditional-medicine students can attend apprenticeship training and pass a skills test. And practitioners who want to open a clinic no longer need approval from the CFDA. They need only register with the agency.

The government’s ultimate goal is for all Chinese health-care institutions to provide a basic level of TCMs by 2020. A road map released in February 2016 by the State Council, China’s highest administrative body, plans to increase the number of TCM-licensed doctors to 4 per 10,000 people, an increase from fewer than 3 practitioners per 10,000 people. The government also wants to push TCMs’ share of pharmaceutical sales from 26% to 30% by the end of the decade. ■

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3. Lord, G. M. *et al. Lancet* **358**, 1515–1516 (2001).

CORRECTIONS

The News story ‘Hungary rewards success’ (*Nature* **551**, 425–426; 2017) understated the funding for the Hungarian Brain Research Programme. It received 18.5 billion forints, not 18.5 million. And the News story ‘Science scrambles after storm’ (*Nature* **551**, 282–283; 2017) erred in its description of karst. Karst is not a type of rock formation, but a variety of landscape formed by the erosion of rock.