Self-Medication Ubiquitous in Chinese Immigrants

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SAN FRANCISCO — The use of traditional Chinese medicine is nearly universal among Chinese immigrants living in San Francisco, Amy Wu and Samuel LeBaron, M.D., reported in a poster session at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

In a survey of 198 patients, self-medication with herbs was the most frequent form of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), used by 93% of the patients within the past 12 months. Overall, 68% reported self-medication with topical preparations, 33% reported using herbal medications prescribed by a TCM doctor, and 7% reported using topicals prescribed by a TCM doctor.

Also, 14% of the patients reported using acupuncture, 12% massage therapy, 11% tai chi, 7% qigong, and 5% other modalities.

In a parallel study, Ms. Wu (a third-year medical student) and family physician Dr. LeBaron of Stanford (Calif.) University found that of 17 physicians serving those patients, 24% said they asked about TCM rarely, 58% sometimes, and 18% usually.

Since conducting this study, "I find that I'm asking all my Chinese patients now about their use of TCM, which I had not done before," Dr. LeBaron said in an interview. "More than half of them say yes. They've already been using it for whatever ailment brought them in."

He acknowledged that he would advise some patients to be cautious in using TCM, including such those with renal or liver disease, patients on multiple medications, or those on medications with many known interactions, such as coumadin.

He described a patient being treated by an oncologist for prostate cancer, and who was also being treated by a TCM doctor with acupuncture and herbal medicine. "I actually brought the list of medications to the TCM doctor—who is well trained in Western medicine—and vice versa, I took the list of herbal preparations to the oncologist, so both of them could see what was going on and make comparisons," he said. "I also consulted with a pharmacist. So there's a lot of double checking that we should do."

"We have to put it in perspective too and realize that most likely with our Western medical treatments we're causing far more complications than our patients are getting from TCM. So while we should be cautious about it, we probably should be focusing the majority of our attention on the very Western drugs that we ourselves are using," Dr. LeBaron said. ■

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