

China Shows Increased Support for TCM Research

By Michael Devitt

In what is believed to be a first, the Chinese government has announced that it will include research on traditional Chinese medicine as part of its National Basic Research Program (NBRP).

In July, the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology reported that it would invest more than 52 million *yuan* (approximately \$6.4 million U.S.) into the NBRP between 2005 and 2006 to support basic research, signifying a major shift in the recognition of traditional Chinese medicine and its role in general health and well-being.

The NBRP was approved by the Chinese government in June 1997, and serves as a branch of the Ministry of Science and Technology. According to a statement on the program's Web site, the NBRP's main responsibilities are "rejuvenating the country through science and technology," along with the promotion of sustainable development and improvements in basic research.

According to Vice Minister of Science and Technology Cheng Jinpei, the program will fund three projects, consisting of the use of herbal prescriptions and formulas; applications of modern science in the study of traditional Chinese medicine; and research into acupuncture and the *jingluo*, a traditional classification of acupuncture meridians. Cheng said that the addition of these projects would show the government's support for more "systematic research" into basic TCM theories.

The inclusion of traditional Chinese medicine as part of the country's basic research program appears to have sprung from a series of discussions between Ministry executives. According to a July 2, 2005 article in the *Beijing Evening News*, a ministry evaluation committee was originally unable to reach a decision as to whether TCM should be added to the program, but decided to include traditional Chinese medicine after senior officials at the ministry encouraged them to do so.

At press time, the NBRP had yet to reveal how many institutions would be involved in the research projects, or how the funding would be distributed among researchers. However, in an interview with the Science and Development Network, Yang Xiuwei, a professor of pharmacology at Peking University, stated that earlier practices of sharing funding among several facilities may have hindered research on traditional Chinese medicine, due to the inherently complex nature of TCM.

"The government has invested a lot of money in research on traditional medicine, but it was divided among many institutes, meaning none of them had enough to implement a major research project," said Yang.

According to the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, more than 7.8 billion *yuan* (approximately \$966 million U.S.) was spent on TCM research and education between 2000 and 2004. The NBRP will allocate a total of 1.5 billion *yuan* (approximately \$185 million U.S.) in funding in 2005 and 2006, allowing scientists to conduct basic research in areas such as agriculture, sustainable energy and therapeutic cloning, and diseases such as HIV and severe acute respiratory syndrome.

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