

Medicine gets a feel for Orient

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AFTER more than 2500 years, traditional Chinese medicines and therapies are finding a place in **the once-sceptical world** of Western emergency departments and medical laboratories.

The Chinese Medicine department at RMIT's School of Health Sciences, the largest provider of Chinese medicine studies in Australia, is collaborating with a range of Victorian hospitals to trial the use and benefits of ancient remedies such as acupuncture and ginseng.

Acupuncture has been trialled on patients suffering acute pain in emergency rooms at the Alfred, Northern, Epworth and Cabrini Hospitals, while ginseng - a root believed to increase stamina and quality of life since the 11th century - is being tested to relieve symptoms of chronic lung disease at Box Hill Hospital and Austin Health.

Professor Charlie Xue, director of the Traditional and Complementary Medicine Research Program at RMIT's Health Innovations Research Institute said the projects aimed to bring together the best of Eastern and Western approaches to health. He said that while there were continuing doubts about many so-called complementary and alternative therapies, RMIT believed Chinese medicine should be developed "on very strong scientific underpinnings".

"By applying scientific rigor to our analysis of Chinese treatments, we can share the fruits of knowledge that has built up over 2500 years," he said.

These trials were examples of how Chinese and conventional therapies could co-exist.

The acupuncture trial, which began at the Northern in 2009, aims to compare the practice against standard pharmacological responses in emergency patients with acute pain from migraines, ankle sprains and lower back pain.

The Alfred's Chinese medicine practitioner Shefton Parker said doctors welcomed the trial. When it began last year director of emergency services De Villiers Smit said a third of the world's population relied on acupuncture as their prime medical treatment and studies indicated it relieved pain by promoting the release of neurotransmitters and endorphins into the body.

"Acupuncture is known to have some effect on pain, but in an acute scenario it's never been tested," said Mr Parker. "Typically most acupuncture trials have been done in a more chronic setting, where people have suffered, say, migraines.

"There's a lot of patients who present in hospitals with pain and there's really only one method of treatment which is analgesia and which some patients have reactions to or are contraindicated. For them it provides an alternative."

One aspect of the trial is to see if acupuncture can reduce waiting times and reduce the pressure on doctors, he said.

Professor Xue said ginseng trials looked at whether the herb could improve lung function for patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), a term for diseases such as chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

He said there had been comprehensive research into ginseng and its traditional use matched well with the symptoms of lung disease. "We want to look into three things: can the herbal medicine reduce the progression of the disease, can we also help people improve their quality of life - and when people have later stage COPD their life is miserable - and can it partially recover lung function."