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“How can TCM practitioners make traditional Chinese herbal decoctions relevant to their patients’ modern lifestyle?”

Incorporating traditional Chinese herbal decoctions in the modern American lifestyle is a matter of ease, efficacy and trust. As practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), we can assist patients by providing the equipment, education and encouragement necessary to easily incorporate their herbal prescriptions into their daily routines.

Coffee, a herbal decoction produced by extracting the active components of the coffee bean in hot water, is consumed daily by 54% of Americans over the age of 18, according to the Harvard School of Public Health.¹ Why has this herbal beverage become the leading beverage of our great nation? Coffee is accessible, easy to consume and produces subjectively experiential benefits. TCM practitioners can take advantage of the coffee industry’s understanding of the needs and expectations of the modern American lifestyle.

If a decoction is easy to brew, it will be easy to consume, generating more patient compliance and better results for their health. The chief complaint I receive from patients who take the raw herbal decoctions is the inconvenience of brewing the herbs. As an industry, we must respond to this need by producing an automatic herbal teapot that generates an experience of ease while brewing traditional Chinese herbal decoctions. The current generic herbal teapot on the market brings the herbs to a boil, but does not turn off automatically, requiring the patient to set a timer, be mindful of the brewing, turn off the pot and drain the hot decoction from a spout that easily splashes. I propose that we make available to the patient a ceramic pot that requires the patient to only place the herbs and water in the pot and press a button. The pot will bring the water to the boil for an appropriate amount of time (generally 40 minutes), and once the brew is complete, turn off the heat and automatically press the herbs to the bottom as a french press would, providing a fully decocted and strained medicinal beverage available to the patient at their convenience.

It is generally agreed in the TCM community that the efficacy of raw Chinese herbal decoction is greater and faster than those of powdered or tablet extracts. For appropriate medical conditions and formulas, the practitioner should encourage the patient to drink the raw herbal decoctions, rather than taking pills or powdered extracts for a more noticeable or faster onset of the treatment benefits. In addition to encouraging the patient to participate in decocting raw formulas, guiding them to have body awareness during the course of treatment will allow them to experience the efficacy of the herbal formula for themselves. By coaching the patient’s awareness of their health or discomfort, the herbs can speak for themselves, and the spirit-

¹ ‘Coffee by the Numbers,’ Harvard T.H. Chan, School of Public Health, Boston, MA, 2017 <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/multimedia-article/facts/>

consciousness of the patient is empowered to participate in the healing process. The most powerful healing experience is one that is personally verified.

A patient will only be open to incorporating traditional Chinese herbal decoctions into their daily routines once trust has been established between the patient and the herbs themselves. As practitioners, we can facilitate this relationship by prioritizing quality sourcing of the herbs we offer, and emphasizing this quality and safety consistently. Many patients are concerned with the safety of Chinese herbal medicine grown and manufactured in China due to reports of poor quality control. By choosing herbal companies of integrity that diligently test for contaminants such as heavy metals, bacteria and pesticides, and abide by Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs), practitioners can offer detailed and transparent assurance to the patient on the quality of their herbs.

Traditional Chinese Medicine is a holistic medicine rooted in ancient Taoist principles of naturalism and balanced sustainability. The herbal decoctions our patients interact with should reflect these principles; the quality of a herb is not only found in its biochemistry, but the energetics produced by its growing conditions. As practitioners and producers, the TCM community can help support this energetic quality by buying from suppliers who have sustainable agricultural and social business practices. As is so often done in the marketing of other herbal supplements or beverages, each packet of Chinese herbs should contain a subtle but firm reminder of this commitment to excellence, through a small profile of an herbal supplier and explicitly stating the principles of sustainability and naturalism that went into that choice of vendor. This will reenforce a sense of safety and trust for the patient, as well as reflecting the values of naturalism and wholism that draw people to Chinese herbal treatments.

The coffee industry has blazed the trail of understanding the needs and expectations of the modern American. The coffee drinking experience is flooded with innovative decocting equipment, making consumption of the beverage easy and readily available. By improving our herbal pots to something more familiar to the American public and less labor intensive, such as a herbal pot with automatic on-off brewing in a French-press style, the modern patient will feel acknowledged and familiar with the decocting process. In the last decade, the coffee industry has also listened to the call for transparency in marketing of the product supply chain by offering Fair-Trade and Organic certifications and guarantees, along with consistent marketing of farmer profiles and easily accessible information on manufacturing. A similarly in-depth attention to transparency of fair and sustainable sources will meet the expectations of the modern patient.

The key to increasing the relevance of traditional Chinese herbal decoction in the modern patients' lifestyle is to facilitate the ease, effectiveness, safety and natural sustainability of the herbal experience. By providing the equipment, education and encouragement necessary to make taking herbal decoctions easy and beneficial, we as practitioners offer a genuine service to the patient's quest for health.