# Urgent need to establish an official Chinese medicine information dissemination platform in Hong Kong to cope with the outbreak of infectious diseases

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## Importance of traditional Chinese medicine in epidemic management

During the COVID-19 outbreak in China, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) interventions were used alongside conventional medical treatments.[1] Traditional Chinese medicine has been integral to epidemic management since ancient China, utilising herbal remedies to combat diseases such as smallpox and the plague. This historical application was evident during the 1918 influenza pandemic, when TCM substantially reduced symptoms and mortality across Asia.[2] The integration of TCM with conventional treatments during the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak underscored its efficacy in boosting immune responses and managing symptoms, considerably alleviating disease severity and duration.[3-5] During the COVID-19 epidemic in Hubei, China, TCM provided comprehensive treatment and prevention strategies, demonstrating its adaptability and potential to complement modern medical practices in managing complex diseases.[6] The Chinese government and healthcare authorities integrated TCM into their national guidelines for COVID-19 management. Several TCM-based anti-epidemic plans were developed in Mainland, such as the Guidance and Recommendations on Chinese Medicine Rehabilitation During COVID-19 Recovery Stage (Pilot Version) in 2020.[7] Drawing on the mainland's expertise, an expert panel formulated a comprehensive collection of TCM anti-epidemic strategies for clinical implementation, based on the Chinese medicine anti-epidemic plans, the established clinical plan in Hong Kong in 2022.[8] These plans offer guidance on the application of TCM across various tiers and target demographics. They also address individuals categorised as close contacts, asymptomatic patients, individuals with mild symptoms, patients receiving care in isolation facilities, and those in the recovery phase. A focus group interview study in 2022 explored the perspectives and use of these guidelines among Hong Kong TCM practitioners.[9] This commentary builds on this earlier study,[9] offering additional insights and practical recommendations that were not fully explored in the original publication.

## Barriers to implementing traditional Chinese medicine guidelines

This qualitative study employing semi-structured focus group discussions was conducted in Cantonese with 22 registered TCM practitioners in Hong Kong, purposively sampled from three major professional associations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong (Ref No.: HSEARS20220428008). All participants have read the information sheet about the study and provided informed consent. Participants represented a balanced demographic and educational profile, with substantial clinical experience in managing COVID-19 cases during the fifth wave of the pandemic. Discussions, held online and analysed via template analysis, explored practitioners' perceptions and use of the Chinese medicine anti-epidemic plans. The study identified both facilitators and barriers to implementing these plans in Hong Kong, along with practitioners' expectations for their improvement.[9] A key finding was the absence of an official TCM information dissemination platform in Hong Kong. Practitioners reported difficulties in distinguishing useful information amid excessive daily communications from multiple channels, including professional groups, social media, workplaces, and training programmes. This information overload often reduced awareness of the Chinese medicine anti-epidemic plans. Additionally, the documents were released after the peak of the epidemic, by which time most practitioners had already established their own diagnostic and treatment approaches; the evolving disease profile further reduced the relevance of the plans. Overall, TCM in Hong Kong relies on a fragmented and poorly coordinated system of information sharing, which lacks authoritative oversight and real-time interaction, limiting its

  

effectiveness during rapidly evolving health crises.

## Expectations for an official platform for traditional Chinese medicine

Practitioners emphasised the need for an official TCM platform to provide timely, authoritative, and forward-looking information. They noted that reliance on informal networks often delayed access to critical documents, underscoring the importance of a centralised channel, ideally managed by the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong. Practitioners suggested the platform should enable the sharing of first-hand clinical data, treatment experiences, and special case reports, fostering collaboration and collective problem-solving. Early experiences, even if limited, were viewed as valuable in guiding others. Additionally, experts could adapt and localise plans to Hong Kong's context, such as addressing the prevalent damp-heat pattern, which was absent from existing guidelines. Experts also highlighted the need for a dedicated organisation, such as a university alliance or non-governmental body, to manage the platform and update its content regularly. The study findings support the establishment of an official TCM information dissemination platform in Hong Kong. Supporting quotations are provided in the online supplementary Appendix.

The Figure illustrates the flow of official traditional Chinese medicine guidelines from central authorities to local implementation, together with the proposed platform's operational functions and mechanisms. The proposed platform (dotted box in the Fig) serves dual functions, namely, efficient dissemination of guidelines to traditional Chinese medicine practitioners through targeted communication channels, and collection and integration of frontline clinical experiences. The latter is achieved through three key components: special case collection, clinical experience summarisation, and practitioners' online discussion forums, which collectively inform seasonal guideline updates. This dynamic structure enables continuous refinement and localisation of guidelines while maintaining alignment with Hong Kong's regulatory framework.

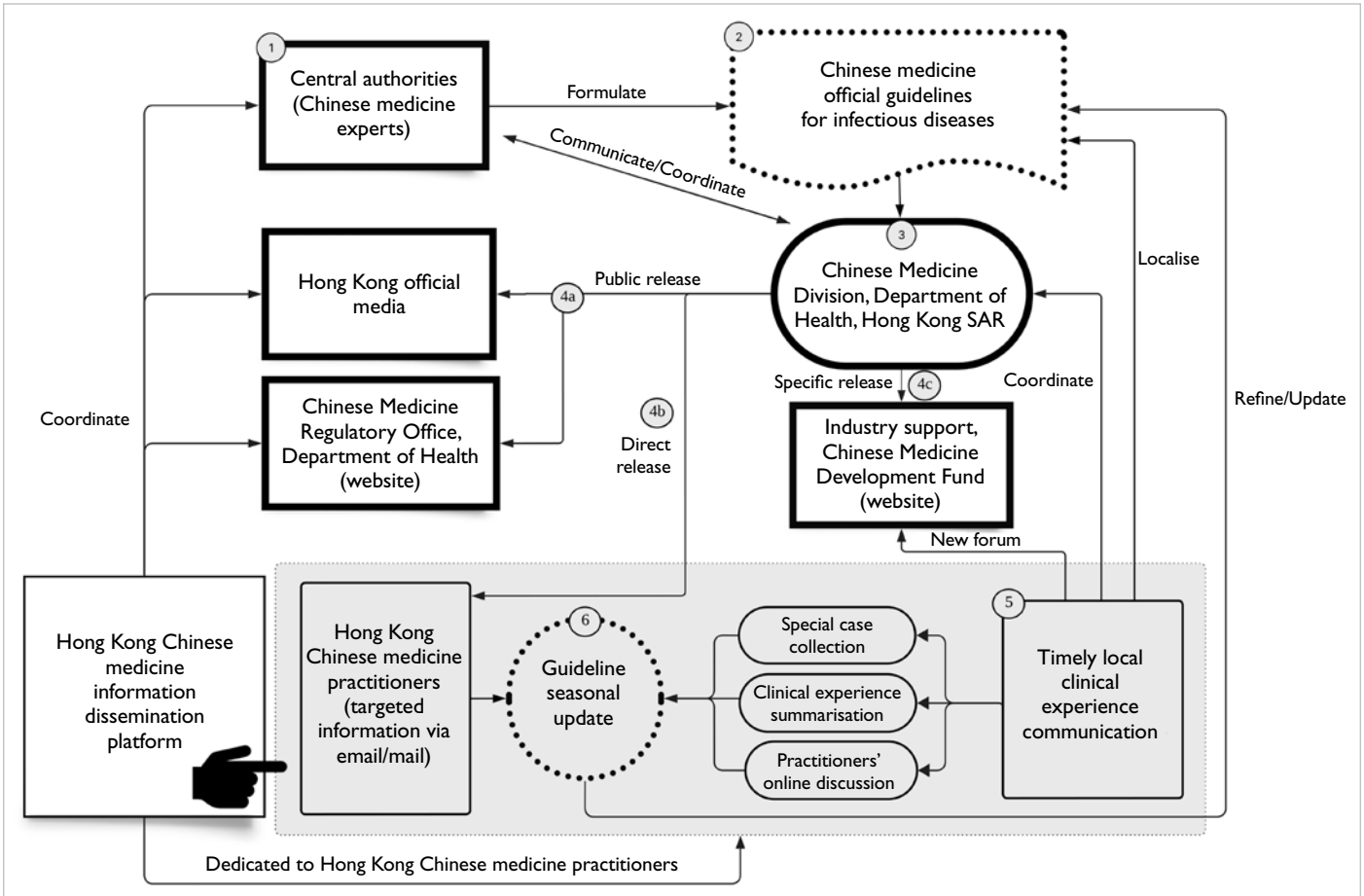


**FIG. A dedicated information platform for traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in Hong Kong's healthcare system***

* Box outlines differentiate categories, with thick solid border representing regulatory bodies, medium dashed border representing official guidelines, and thin solid border representing practitioner-level activities. Arrows indicate the multidirectional flow of information and coordination pathways between stakeholders, highlighting the platform's role in bridging official guidance with real-world clinical practice

## Calling for an official platform for traditional Chinese medicine in Hong Kong

Despite the various channels available for TCM practitioners to obtain relevant information, the absence of an official platform or institution dedicated to TCM information dissemination in Hong Kong poses considerable challenges. This infrastructure deficiency means that TCM practitioners may miss important guidance documents. Moreover, the information overload prevalent in the digital age further complicates the task of discerning the usefulness and reliability of available resources. Establishing a platform would provide practitioners with a centralised and standardised resource hub, ensuring the accessibility of essential guidance documents. For example, in Mainland, the most important guidance plans are released on the official website of the central government.[7] Several TCM platforms exist, such as the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong,[10] the Chinese Medicine Development Fund Resource Platform,[11] and the Chinese Medicine section of GovHK.[1] However, no official platform specifically for releasing, sharing, and exchanging TCM information exists, which hinders the dissemination of crucial documents and updates, especially during epidemic crises. Furthermore, the participating TCM practitioners emphasised the importance of sharing case reports, summarising treatment and diagnostic experiences, and gathering information on epidemic characteristics. Therefore, a TCM platform is necessary for rapid data collection, particularly during epidemic outbreaks. Our findings align with the need for the healthcare workforce to engage in "supportive conversations, clear guidance when recommendations exist, attempts to minimize misinformation, and efforts reduce anxiety"[12]—crucial considerations for effective responses to COVID-19.

Establishing such a TCM information dissemination platform has the potential to enhance healthcare access for marginalised communities, particularly during health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It could provide essential, authoritative knowledge directly to individuals, which is crucial for enabling these communities to utilise self-administered TCM interventions (eg, acupressure or herbal dietary therapies) that align with their health needs. The platform would also serve as a reliable source for community members to verify symptoms, explore treatment options, and gain insights into their health conditions, empowering them to make preliminary decisions about their care.

An official TCM information dissemination platform is also poised to improve public health outcomes by enhancing resource accessibility and fostering community engagement. By extending access to TCM resources, the platform would help reduce healthcare disparities, particularly benefiting those in remote or underserved areas. Additionally, its interactive tools would promote collaboration among TCM practitioners, and between practitioners and patients, strengthening the collective knowledge base and refining TCM practices through real-world feedback. This dual approach would not only improve individual health management but also bolster overall public health resilience and effectiveness.

### Author contributions

Concept or design: YS Ho.
Acquisition of data: YS Ho.
Analysis or interpretation of data: SC Chen.
Drafting of the manuscript: SC Chen.
Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: WF Yeung, YS Ho.

All authors had full access to the data, contributed to the study, approved the final version for publication, and take responsibility for its accuracy and integrity.

### Conflicts of interest

All authors have disclosed no conflicts of interest.

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### Supplementary material

The supplementary material was provided by the authors and some information may not have been peer reviewed. Accepted supplementary material will be published as submitted by the authors, without any editing or formatting. Any opinions or recommendations discussed are solely those of the author(s) and are not endorsed by the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine and the Hong Kong Medical Association. The Hong Kong Academy of Medicine and the Hong Kong Medical Association disclaim all liability and responsibility arising from any reliance placed on the content. To view the file, please visit the journal online (https://doi.org/10.12809/hkmj2411677).

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# Answers to CME Programme
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Hong Kong Med J 2025;31:265-76

**I. Updated recommendations on knee osteoarthritis management: The Hong Kong College of Orthopaedic Surgeons position statement**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 1. True | 2. True | 3. True | 4. True | 5. False |
| B | 1. True | 2. True | 3. False | 4. False | 5. False |

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**II. Clinical outcomes after implementation of a lung nodule surveillance programme in Hong Kong**

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 1. True | 2. False | 3. False | 4. False | 5. True |
| B | 1. True | 2. True | 3. True | 4. True | 5. False |