

Research on the Role of Traditional Chinese Medicine in the Elderly Care Industry

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Abstract

In the context of population aging, healthy elderly care has received much attention. This study investigated the role of Chinese medicine in the elderly care industry and analyzed the status quo of aging and the need for elderly care in China, covering living, medical and health care. The characteristics of the integration of Chinese medicine and the elderly care industry include “preventive treatment of disease”, the full range of services, and a focus on holistic conditioning, with advantages including safety, many physiotherapy methods, and high cost-effectiveness. The current status of its development was reviewed, starting with the integration of medical and elderly care and community-based elderly care; challenges such as insufficient standardization, a shortage of talent, and difficulty supervising service quality were noted; and suggestions were put forward in response to problems such as promoting standardization, strengthening talent training, improving policy support, and industrial integration and innovation. This study provides a theoretical reference for the development of TCM health care services for elderly individuals.

Keywords

traditional Chinese medicine, elderly care industry, population aging, integration of medical and elderly care, industrial development

1. Introduction

Against the background of increasingly serious population aging, the issue of healthy elderly care has gradually become the focus of social attention. As a traditional medicine in China, TCM has unique advantages in health care and elderly care services and is of great help in improving the quality of elderly care services. However, how to fully exploit the role of TCM in the health and elderly care service industry remains an urgent problem to be solved. In recent years, with the continuous development of TCM health care services for elderly individuals, their application in elderly care services has become increasingly widespread. For example, the relative advantages of TCM in “medicine, nourishment, and prevention” can supplement medical resources while improving the physique of elderly people, reducing the incidence of geriatric diseases from the root causes (Zhang & Hu, 2019). In addition, the research hotspots of TCM health care services include the demand for TCM health care services and the influencing factors, the model of TCM health care services, TCM community home care services, the TCM health care service industry, and the training of health personnel in TCM (An & Li, 2017). The purpose of this paper is to explore how to fully explore the role of TCM in the health and elderly care service industry to provide a theoretical reference for the development of TCM health and elderly care services in China.

2. Status quo of Population Aging and Elderly Care Needs in China

2.1 Current Status of Aging

According to the data of the Seventh National Census, the population aged 60 years and over has reached 264 million, accounting for 18.70% of the total population, and the degree of population aging in China is higher than the world average (the population aged 60 years and over accounts for approximately 16% of the total population). In recent years, the number of elderly people has continued to rise: compared with 2010, the proportion of the population 60 years and over has increased by 5.44 percentage points (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). It is predicted that by 2030, the number of elderly people over the age of 60 in China will be close to 400 million, accounting for more than 25%. The process of population aging has significantly accelerated.

2.2 Endowment Needs

At present, elderly care needs in China are mainly summarized in the following four aspects: (1) Life care needs: As they age, some elderly people's ability to take care of themselves in daily life, such as dressing, bathing, and eating, declines. Disabled and semidisabled elderly people have an enormous demand for daily care, rehabilitation nursing and other services, and their requirements for professionalism and meticulousness of services are increasing daily. (2) Medical and health needs: Elderly individuals have a high incidence of various chronic diseases, such as hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. In addition to daily disease treatment, services such as health management, rehabilitation nursing, and chronic disease monitoring, prevention and treatment are also needed. (3) Spiritual and cultural needs: On the basis of satisfying material life, elderly people have a greater pursuit of spiritual and cultural life. Eager to participate in social activities, which can enrich the spiritual world and relieve the sense of loneliness; (4) needs safety guarantees: elderly people need real-time monitoring of their physical health; at the same time, environmentally, due to the decreased physical function of elderly people, there is an increase in the level of harmful substances in the environment. Therefore, it is necessary to create a healthy and reliable environment to protect the life safety of elderly people.

3. Characteristics and Advantages of the Elderly Care Industry Based on the Integration of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Chinese Medicine

Elderly care services combined with traditional Chinese medicine and medical care refer to the use of TCM theory and methods combined with modern elderly care services to provide personalized health management and disease prevention services for elderly individuals: human body function and improved immunity. Moreover, through the organization of TCM cultural knowledge exchange activities, the organization and teaching of Baduanjin, Taichi and other aerobics with TCM characteristics can improve the quality of life of the elderly and increase their social participation on the basis of enriching their spiritual life. .

3.1 Patient Characteristics

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has distinctive characteristics. From a conceptual point of view, TCM adheres to the concept of "preventive treatment of disease" and not only limits itself to disease treatment but also pays more attention to the early prevention of disease and the enhancement of the physical fitness of the elderly through health care. In terms of service content, when TCM is combined with the elderly care industry, it covers TCM physical examination, health assessment, TCM rehabilitation physiotherapy, TCM conditioning, and health preservation exercise guidance, forming a comprehensive and personalized health management system. For example, an exclusive dietary plan for the elderly has been developed, in which different Chinese herbal medicines and ingredients are used according to their constitution to achieve the purpose of conditioning the body. In addition, traditional Chinese medicine focuses on overall conditioning: the human body is regarded as an organic whole, and physical, psychological, and living habits are taken into consideration. In elderly care services, not only the physical health of elderly individuals but also their participation in relevant medical institutions through emotional

counseling and guidance are considered. Traditional Chinese medicine activities such as tai chi regulate the psychological state of elderly people, enrich their spiritual life, and promote physical and mental harmony.

3.2 Advantages of TCM in Elderly Care Services

The advantages are as follows: (1) High safety: Most Chinese medicines are natural medicines with relatively few side effects, which are easier for elderly people with weak physical functions to accept. For example, topical Chinese herbal ointment for joint pain relief can effectively reduce pain and avoid the burden of oral drugs on the liver and kidney. (2) There are many effective rehabilitation methods in TCM; for example, acupuncture stimulates acupoints to regulate the health of the human body. The operation of qi and blood in the meridians can improve the symptoms of neurological diseases such as hemiparesis and facial paralysis, which are common in elderly individuals. Cupping can result in negative pressure in the cup, which is adsorbed on the skin, promotes local blood circulation, and relieves muscle fatigue. A variety of rehabilitation methods can cooperate with each other to achieve a synergistic effect. (3) Promotion of cost-effectiveness advantages: Compared with those of Western medicine rehabilitation treatment technologies and expensive imported drugs, the costs of health care and rehabilitative means of Chinese medicine are relatively low. TCM physical examination, simple tuina massage, and commonly used TCM conditioning services are available at affordable prices, which can reduce the financial burden on elderly individuals and their families. Moreover, through the application of the concept of “preventive treatment of diseases” in TCM, the occurrence and development of diseases can be effectively prevented, and medical expenditures for serious diseases can be reduced. In the long run, it also has positive significance for the rational distribution and utilization of social medical resources and is conducive to its promotion over a larger scope. and more popularization to benefit more elderly people.

4. Status quo of the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine Health Care Services for the Elderly

At present, the development of TCM healthy elderly care services is carried out in two main aspects: “the integration of medical and elderly care” and “community elderly care”.

4.1 Combined Medical and Elderly Care

In some places, TCM hospitals have set up special departments for health preservation and “preventive treatment of diseases” to provide characteristic TCM services, including acupuncture, massage, and cupping (Yang, 2023). The Medical and Nursing Center of Zhijiang Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine provides personalized TCM diagnosis, treatment and care for elderly individuals in the departments of geriatric medicine, rehabilitation and preventive treatment (Hu et al., 2014). Zhenba County Hospital of TCM has introduced key doctors of TCM acupuncture and moxibustion physiotherapy, excellent TCM doctors and excellent TCM physicians. TCM nurses serve as the people in charge of the rehabilitation center and implement the concept of preventive treatment and TCM rehabilitation. At the same time, the TCM hospital has also set up a medicated dining hall, which uses the wisdom of TCM to ensure balanced nutrition and improve the conditions of elderly individuals. In two sessions in 2025, Academician Zhang Boli proposed that TCM has prominent advantages in health care for the elderly and suggested that attention should be given to the popularization and application of TCM products suitable for the elderly and the integration of medicinal and edible foods, a medicated diet, and auxiliary rehabilitation devices into the health of elderly individuals. Rehabilitation institutions such as community elderly care centers (Hunan CPPCC News, 2025). This further confirmed the model of the combination of medical and elderly care.

4.2 Community Elderly Care

Many community hospitals have set up TCM clinics to provide convenient TCM services for residents (Hu et al., 2014). In addition, some local governments have introduced supporting policies to encourage the combination of TCM and elderly care services. For example, the Heilongjiang Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences has cooperated with elderly care institutions to provide combined medical and elderly care services (Hu et al., 2014); Shanghai Yanji Community No. 2 Comprehensive Service Center for the Elderly In

addition, the Neijiang family doctor workstation has been established, and TCM consulting rooms and TCM constitution detectors have been built to empower elderly care services with the wisdom of TCM.

5. Challenges in the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) Elderly Care Services

5.1 Insufficient Standardization and Normalization

At present, owing to the complexity and individualized characteristics of TCM, TCM often needs to be boiled, and the boiling time and firepower of the same prescription affect the efficacy of the medicine, which makes it difficult to standardize TCM services. Moreover, there is currently a lack of systematic integration and standardization of intervention methods and technologies for common diseases and chronic diseases that reflect the advantages of TCM characteristics, which hinders the internationalization of TCM (Hu et al., 2014).

5.2 Talent Training and Professional Talent Shortages

In 2020, 55.1% of TCM practitioner (assistant) physicians had a bachelor's degree or above, 61.5% of which were TCM practitioners with a college degree or above (Wang et al., 2024). Owing to the long training cycle, high training investment, and dislocation between traditional technology and the modern development needs of TCM professionals, the training of TCM professionals has not received enough attention, resulting in a shortage of TCM talent.

5.3 Low Social Awareness

At present, medical service centers and medical institutions in many places do not dig deep enough into the role of TCM, and mainstream medical colleges and universities have adopted mostly Western medicine talent training programs, which, together with the emergence of substandard TCM products on the market, have made society's overall perception of TCM low, resulting in a lack of enthusiasm and trust in TCM. Compared with TCM elderly care service centers, most families tend to send elderly people to WM-dominated elderly care service centers.

5.4 Service Quality and Supervision Challenges

The quality of TCM health care services for the elderly is affected by various factors, including professional knowledge, operational techniques, and equipment conditions. For example, the problems facing TCM services include the elimination of characteristic diagnostic and treatment techniques, lax processing technology, and insufficient standardization. Ensuring service quality and scientific supervision have become important challenges for the development of the TCM elderly care industry.

6. Suggestions for the Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine Elderly Care Services

6.1 Promotion of the Standardization of TCM Geriatric Medicine

A comprehensive evaluation system should be built to clarify the TCM diagnosis and treatment standards for various geriatric diseases and their treatment outcomes. The Research Association for the Development of TCM Geriatric Medicine was established to summarize and refine the TCM diagnosis and treatment methods suitable for elderly individuals. Moreover, a TCM geriatric database and information sharing platform have been established to share research results and clinical cases through digitized means to achieve the standardization and standardized development of TCM geriatric medicine (Hunan CPPCC News, 2025).

6.2 Strengthening Publicity to Guide the Concept of Elderly Care in TCM

One of the characteristics of Chinese medicine for the elderly is to "prevent the disease", and the treatment is mostly mild. Today, as people pay increasing attention to their own health status and put forward

higher requirements for health services, it is in line with mainstream thinking in current society to promote the elderly care concept of TCM to the public. In terms of publicity methods, socially popular methods such as Weibo and short videos can be used to promote products to society as a whole. To inculcate the elderly care philosophy of TCM into society and increase public awareness and acceptance of TCM. At the same time, referring to the successful experience of the No. 2 Comprehensive Service Center for the Elderly in Shanghai, Yanji Community has actively organized the activities of Chinese medicine in the elderly care community and held free consultations, acupuncture and other services so that the elderly can experience the role of Chinese medicine in protecting their health.

6.3 Strengthening the Training of Talent with the Combination of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Elderly Care

Through cooperation with relevant colleges and universities, the “1+X” model is adopted to carry out interdisciplinary joint training projects: the integration of medicine, nursing, management and other disciplines; at the same time, TCM doctors, rehabilitation therapists and elderly care institutions with rich clinical experience are recruited to promote the training of talent with the combination of TCM and elderly care through cooperation with administrators. Taking China Pharmaceutical University as an example, China Pharmaceutical University has set up a College of Chinese Materia Medica and has specially set up the “Xu Guojun Top-notch Class in Chinese Medicine”. The curriculum design of this class includes multidisciplinary courses such as clinical medicine and nursing, and the aim is to cultivate students who are proficient in “medicine and pharmacy” to support high-quality talent.

6.4 Improving the Policy Support System to Promote Industrial Integration and Innovation

The government has introduced policies such as tax incentives and financial subsidies to encourage social capital to invest in the TCM elderly care industry and has formulated service standards and norms for the TCM elderly care industry, clarifying the service contents, quality requirements and supervision mechanism to protect the rights and interests of elderly individuals. In addition, the integration of Chinese medicine for elderly care and tourism, health care, and the internet has been actively promoted. Internet technology can be used to build an online TCM health consultation and diagnosis and treatment service platform to achieve telemedicine and health management and expand the space for industrial development. Currently, Hebei Province has launched a plan to build 30 TCM healthy elderly care demonstration bases to promote the development of the TCM elderly care service industry and explore standardized service processes.

6.5 Promotion of the Application of Smart TCM Services

Integrate technologies such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things to develop an intelligent health management platform. These include the use of wearable devices to monitor the constitution data of elderly people and the provision of personalized health suggestions on the basis of the TCM differentiation model; the promotion of “one-click” medical and nursing mini programs; and the integration of functions such as the delivery of TCM soup bags and remote TCM consultation to enhance the scenario of home-based elderly care Chinese medicine service response efficiency.

7. Epilogue

The Chinese medicine elderly care industry has a wide range of application scenarios and has a unique advantage in improving the quality of life and health level of elderly individuals. However, the application of TCM in elderly care services can not only effectively relieve pressure on social medical resources but also face challenges such as insufficient standardization, a shortage of professional talent, low social awareness, and difficulty in supervising service quality. In the future, the development of standards for elderly care services via TCM, the innovation of talent training models and the quantitative evaluation of service quality should be emphasized. At the policy level, support for TCM elderly care services should increase, more social capital investment should be encouraged, and the industrialization and intelligent development of TCM elderly care services should be promoted to provide higher-quality and more convenient healthy elderly care services for elderly individuals.

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Conflicts of Interest

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