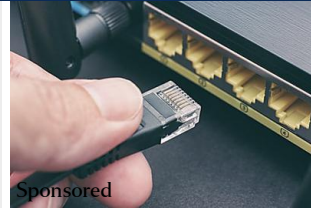




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Woman to get \$50k for TCM session gone wrong



Madam Chow showing injuries on her right thigh from the moxibustion treatment, and (above) a photo of a burn injury near her right knee. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

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She had third-degree burns after treatment and was warded in hospital for a month

Jalelah Abu Baker and K.C. Vijayan Senior Law Correspondent

A 70-year-old woman who suffered third-degree burns on both legs following treatment at a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) clinic will receive \$50,000 in damages.

Housewife Chow See Mui first visited the Annie Tiang TCM Clinic in East Coast Road in August 2014 with her daughter. They bought two packages and health supplements costing more than \$3,000. The packages were for acupuncture and tuina, a Chinese therapeutic massage.

But during a session on Sept 4, 2014, persuaded by TCM practitioner Xia Rongrong, Madam Chow underwent moxibustion. This involves placing the base of a mugwort - a small, spongy herb-cone - on the skin and burning the tip that is not in direct contact with the skin.

According to court papers, Ms Xia claimed the treatment would promote general health, and was painless, harmless and risk-free.

However, it landed Madam Chow, who had only minor aches before the treatment, in hospital for a month with a \$95,000 bill, which she managed to claim from her insurance company.





Madam Chow showing injuries on her right thigh (above) from the moxibustion treatment, and a photo of a burn injury near her right knee. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

A clinic staff member administered the treatment. In her lawsuit, Madam Chow said she felt extreme pain but was told to bear with it as the treatment was harmless and the pain would subside shortly.

She developed blisters the same day. Madam Chow's children called Ms Xia and her husband Joseph Yap, also a TCM practitioner, to tell them her condition was worsening.

The couple maintained that the pain would subside without medical attention. On Sept 10, six days after the treatment, Mr Yap went to Madam Chow's home to check on her, and said again that she did not need medical attention, giving her acupuncture instead.

But the pain persisted. A few days later, Madam Chow went to Gleneagles Hospital, where she was diagnosed with third-degree burns and warded for a month.

Past cases involving TCM physicians

June 2016

A 53-year-old traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) physician and acupuncturist was fined \$5,000 and suspended in June by the TCM Practitioners Board for three months after misdiagnosing a 15-year-old pregnant patient.

Ms Wu Liping had prescribed the teen herbal medication that might have harmed her and her unborn baby. Ms Wu, then working at Shenzhou Chinese Physician Clinic in Jurong East, had diagnosed the patient's condition as hormonal imbalance after she missed her menstruation for five months.

August 2015

An 81-year-old TCM physician who issued medical certificates (MCs) to students without properly assessing their condition was suspended in August last year for three months. She was also fined \$2,000.

Ms Cheong Thiam Mui issued 122 MCs to 109 students of a private academy over about three months from December 2013 to March 2014 while working as a TCM physician and acupuncturist at Cheong's Clinic in Burlington Square in Bencoolen Street.

Treatment not common, say practitioners

Moxibustion, a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treatment, involves the burning of a spongy herb called mugwort.

In direct moxibustion, the herb, which is dried into thin strips called moxa, is rolled into the shape of a cone or cylinder and placed on the skin.

The end not touching the skin is burnt. The moxa is expected to be removed before the burning portion touches the skin.

In indirect moxibustion, the moxa stick or cone is kept at a distance from the skin.

While indirect moxibustion is widely accepted and used, the direct treatment is not common, said Ms Tjioe Yan Yin, a TCM physician at Nanyang Technological University's Chinese Medicine Clinic.

"Direct moxibustion will definitely cause burns. Some people accept it because they believe that burning stimulates the blood. They expect the burn to recover."

When done right, moxibustion is expected to relieve pain from ailments such as rheumatism, she said.

In indirect moxibustion, physicians have to ensure that the moxa is about 3cm to 4cm away from the skin to prevent burns, and check that the heat generated is not too high.

Mr Chong Shaw Fong, 69, a TCM practitioner of 42 years, said he does not provide the treatment any more.

"Some patients' skin may not be suitable for this treatment, for example, if they have diabetes and are taking aspirin," said Mr Chong, who runs a medical hall in Upper Cross Street.

The treatment requires absolute attention and concentration to prevent injury, he said.

He has heard of cases of patients getting burnt but these are rare. "Young people may not trust the treatment but the elderly like it as they are desperate for pain relief," he said.

Jalelah Abu Baker

After her discharge, she found out a pain in her neck was caused by a plastic piece inserted into her neck during acupuncture. It failed to dissolve as she had been told it would. She had it surgically removed in December 2014.

When she brought her claim against the clinic, Ms Xia and Mr Yap, the owners and directors of the clinic, its insurer NTUC Income Insurance Co-operative initially offered her over \$36,000 for both her damages and legal costs.

But she decided to take the claim to court through lawyer Raj Singh Shergill in October last year.

In her court papers, she claimed damages on the grounds of negligence and breach of contractual duty of reasonable care and skill. She also sought aggravated damages from the practitioners, for not just causing her burns but also deterring her from seeking medical attention, thus prolonging her pain.

The case was resolved last month after the court mediated between both parties. Madam Chow turned down an offer of extra money by the practitioners, offered in return for confidentiality.

Madam Chow, who said she still has residual effects from the burns, said: "There is a sense of vindication, but my concern remains that no one else in their elderly years, or any person for that matter, should suffer my fate."

Mr Yap said the clinic staff member who carried out the treatment had been working there for about four months and had "accidentally" burned Madam Chow's leg during moxibustion. "As a manager, I will claim responsibility. I am very sorry about this," he said.

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