

Bee sting therapy causing a buzz in China

August 13 2013, by Neil Connor



A patient receives a bee sting administered by a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine on August 2, 2013. There is no orthodox evidence that bee stings can cure any illnesses, and some websites in the West have branded their use 'quackery'.

Patients in China are swarming to acupuncture clinics to be given bee stings to treat or ward off life-threatening illness, practitioners say.

More than 27,000 people have undergone the painful technique—each session can involve dozens of punctures—at Wang Menglin's clinic in

Beijing, says the bee acupuncturist who makes his living from believers in the concept.

But except for trying to prevent [allergic reactions](#) to the stings themselves, there is no orthodox medical evidence that bee venom is effective against illness, and rationalist websites in the West describe so-called "apitherapy" as "quackery".

"We hold the bee, put it on a point on the body, hold its head, and pinch it until the sting needle emerges," Wang said at his facility on the outskirts of the capital.

The bee—Wang said he uses an imported Italian variety—dies when it stings.

"We've treated patients with dozens of diseases, from arthritis to cancer, all with positive results," said Wang.

Bee stings can be used to treat "most [common diseases](#) of the lower limbs," he added, and claimed they also work as a preventative measure. But sciencebasedmedicine.org, a US-based website, says that such claims of panaceas and cure-alls are "always a red flag for quackery".

"There is no scientific evidence to support its use," it says of "apitherapy", or treatment with bee products.



Bees are prepared by a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine at an acupuncture clinic in Beijing on August 2, 2013. Diseases ranging from arthritis to cancer are treated with the insects.

One of Wang's patients said doctors told him he had lung and [brain cancer](#) and gave him little over a year to live, but he now believes he has almost doubled his [life expectancy](#) and credits bee stings for the change. "From last year up until now, I think I'm getting much stronger," the patient told AFP.

But on its website, the American Cancer Society makes clear: "There have been no clinical studies in humans showing that bee venom or other [honeybee](#) products are effective in preventing or treating cancer.

"Relying on this type of treatment alone and avoiding or delaying conventional medical care for cancer may have serious health consequences."

It adds that there is a Koranic reference to the medicinal properties of the liquid produced by bees, and that Charlemagne (742-814), the first Holy Roman Emperor, is said to have been treated with bee stings.



A patient receives a bee sting administered by a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine at a clinic on the outskirts of Beijing on August 2, 2013. More than 27,000 people have undergone the procedure, which can involve dozens of punctures per session.

In the West bee stings have also been used by sufferers of multiple sclerosis (MS), an often disabling disease that attacks the central nervous system.

But the National Multiple Sclerosis Society of the US says on its website: "In spite of long-standing claims about the possible benefits of [bee venom](#) for people with MS, a 24-week randomised study showed no

reduction in disease activity, disability, or fatigue, and no improvement in quality of life."

The trend for bee acupuncture comes at a time when colonies of the insect around the world are mysteriously collapsing. Environmentalists fear dwindling numbers of bees, which help pollinate crops, could have a serious effect on agricultural production.

Bee venom is one of the many traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treatments derived from animals and plants—some of which are blamed for endangering particular wildlife species.



A patient rests after receiving bee stings administered by a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine at a clinic on the outskirts of Beijing on August 2, 2013. The bee is held by the head against the patient's body and squeezed until it stings.

TCM is a major part of China's healthcare system and a booming industry which continues to receive significant investment and support from the central government.

Many people in China cannot afford to buy the latest orthodox pharmaceuticals as national health insurance is limited.

Older people—who are more likely to fall ill—also favour traditional remedies because of deep-rooted cultural beliefs in the power of natural, rather than modern, ingredients.

Most hospitals in China have traditional medicine treatments available.

It can be a lucrative field for companies and practitioners—in 2012, the TCM industry in China produced goods worth 516 billion yuan (\$84 billion), more than 31 percent of the country's total medicine output, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

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