

Local medicinal plants being studied by scientists

At the insistence of a colleague in the United States who believed strongly in its healing powers, National University of Singapore (NUS) professor Ong Wei Yi bought a bunch of Sabah snake grass from a Telok Blangah market to study.

To his surprise, he found that the plant had significant anti-inflammatory properties, meaning that it has the potential to treat chronic diseases or even conditions like stroke.

“We should have more confidence to explore our natural environment and study it properly,” said Prof Ong, who is from the department of anatomy and neurobiology and the ageing research programme at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

In recent years, scientists like him have been studying local plants with a long history of use as traditional medicines.

These include a ginger-like tuber known as *Rhizoma gastrodiae*, nutmeg, and a chemical found in turmeric known as curcumin, said Dr Zhao Yan, who is a senior lecturer at the Nanyang Technological University’s School of Biological Sciences.

“Research is ongoing and has gained prominence in Singapore and many Western countries,” Dr Zhao said.

Dr Yang Hong, a chemical testing lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic’s school of applied science, said: “Medicinal herbs in South-east Asia have gained some recognition but their acceptance... still faces many challenges.”

For example, these herbs typically come under the category of complementary health products.

“As a result, their quality is less stringently controlled as compared to traditional Chinese medicines,” she explained.

For Prof Ong, the surprising discovery about Sabah snake grass shows that there is much more that can be learnt about traditional medicinal plants.

“People use it to treat cancer or diabetes, but they don’t really know how it works,” he said. “Doctors ought to know exactly what patients are taking.”

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