

Ancient wisdom in a modern package
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The desktop computer hums. With a click of the mouse, the rectangular screen welcomes you to "PenDiag", a soft ware programme designed to chart your basic health -- as predicted by practitioners of ancient Thai medicine, that is.

Dr Pennapa Subeharoen, 43, PenDiag's creator, types in the date and her patient's name and birthdate, then presses the "execute" key. Instantly, words, numbers, and symbols including the lunar phases fill the screen. Most eye-catching are the computerised representations of water, wind, and fire -- the last represented by a flame at the end of a matchstick.

"These represent this year's makeup of your basic elements -- water, earth, wind, and fire. According to your birthdate your ruling 'dhatu' is fire," Dr Pennapa tells her wide-eyed visitor.

"In general, you get sick easily in the summer. Your weak points are manifested in illnesses related to the fire element -- heat in your body and bile around the gall bladder. You're likely to suffer high fevers and liver diseases such as hepatitis."

Pointing out the absence of the earth symbol on the screen, the modern-day medicine woman says that this year her visitor's earth element is 'pikaan', or crippled.

"This means you need to watch out for disorders involving abnormal functioning of the heart and waste matter."

To her relief, the visitor learns that this year her "water" is in order and her "fire" is normal. While her "wind" is a bit overblown, it's not as bad as her handicapped "earth".

The computer reads your elements and rates them on a scale of 0 to 6, explains Dr Pennapa, who is juggling positions as Prachin Buri Province chief medical officer and director of the National Institute of Thai Traditional Medicine (NITTM).

The zero level of an element, represented by the absence of its symbol, means it is in a handicapped stage. Levels one to three mean it is inadequate, while four and five mean it is functioning normally. A reading of six means the element is over-active.

Dr Pennapa presses "print" and the nearby printer spews out four pages -- a detailed diagnosis and advice, peppered with the unfamiliar jargon of traditional Thai medicine -- 'apatta pitta', 'semha', and 'hathai wata'.

"To balance your elements, you should eat bitter, light, and bland foods. Avoid too much spicy and oily food," the programme advises.

One page of the printout contains general behaviour and dietary guidelines, while another contains the patient's astrological reading.

"I put this feature in even though it has little to do with health, because most people like to read their fate," explains Dr Pennapa with a good-humoured smile.

Judging from appearance alone, PenDiag could be just another version of the shopping-mall fortune-telling machine -- drop a five baht coin into

a slot, enter your birthday, press a button, and out comes your fate. Yet PenDiag -- short for "Pennapa Thai Traditional Medicine Diagnostic Programme" -- is built on a centuries-old body of knowledge as well as decades of "digging" by Dr Pennapa herself. In Thai tradition, medical and astrological factors are closely intertwined, she says.

"But this programme isn't about astrology. It's about a Thai-style health science which takes into account natural elements. One of its concepts is that your health is affected by the time of your birth, which is linked to such factors as the stars and climate you were born under, and the kind of food that was in season during your mother's pregnancy."

PenDiag is a tool for preventive medicine, as it "helps people to learn their weak points and how to fortify them.

"Its diagnosis isn't absolute, however. It gives you a kind of baseline. One reason is that your natal chart is truest during your first six years. After that, other factors assert greater influence over you, for example the kind of food you eat or the climate you live in."

With help from a computer programmer, Dr Pennapa started developing the software three years ago during her weekends and free time.

"Some of the wording is still difficult to understand as it's geared towards those with background in traditional medicine," she admits, adding that a more accessible version is on the way.

The programme, completed two months ago, is being used to train novices working at the Thai Traditional Medicine (TTM) clinic and demonstration centre at the Prachin Buri Provincial Health Office.

"It's also helpful in diagnosis and research work. It's fast and can be used to find correlations between illnesses and other factors -- say, to find common characteristics among cancer patients."

PenDiag's prototype is an annual health calendar she herself composed -- a colour-coded circle filled with drawings and explanations. Years ago, Dr Pennapa created the calendar as an easy reference from information she collected when she began studying TTM ten years ago.

To make it easier and faster to read, she later condensed the data into a rotating circular chart, and finally into PenDiag.

Dr Pennapa's fascination with Thai traditional medicine has its roots in her concern for the rural poor.

After graduating from Prince Songkhla University's College of Medicine, the general practitioner headed back to her hometown of Prachin Buri to run a district hospital in Wang Nam Yen.

"I was distressed not to be able to help my patients. Some were too poor to afford Western medicines and treatment. I wanted them to be able to care for themselves better."

The memory of how her herbalist father helped other villagers with his knowledge prompted her to embark on a path of Thai traditional medicine study.

At Wang Nam Yen, she put her ideas into practice and conducted clinical tests of herbal medicines. After two years, the study was expanded to

cover other aspects of Thai traditional medicine.

Dr Pennapa says she is indebted to the "teachers" who have educated her over the years. Among them are old texts inscribed on palm leaves kept at the National Library.

When in Bangkok, she would visit the Chatuchak Weekend Market, rummaging through old books for bits and pieces of useful information.

"Sometimes old people would give me their heirloom scriptures. What I didn't understand, I asked elder people and traditional doctors to help clarify for me."

At Wang Nam Yen, her team cultivated a large herbal garden and began producing quality herbal medicines now available nationwide.

"Even since I joined the provincial health office five years ago, the clinic at Wang Nam Yen has continued to do well, generating enough income to stand on its own."

After being promoted to the top position at the Prachin Buri Provincial Health Office, she set up a clinic and training/demonstration centre on its grounds a year-and-a-half ago. The clinic is manned by nine staff members four of whom are graduates of Ayuraveth College -- an institute founded by her mentor, the late Prof Ouay Ketusingh. A highly-respected scholar, Prof Ouay devoted his life to bridging the gap between Thai and Western medicine.

The clinic, which is also the Central Region TTM Demonstration Centre, sees a stream of patients coming in with various maladies. Newcomers are asked to fill out forms which include questions about the geography of their birthplace and current residence, their behaviour, and their favourite types of food.

"Although we don't prescribe Western medicine here, we use modern devices -- stethoscopes and blood pressure gauges, for example -- to facilitate diagnosis. The Ayuraveth graduates are also knowledgeable in the basics of modern medicine."

Noppawan Surahiran, a 42-year-old teacher who suffers from 'lom pakung' or migraines, is coming for her second treatment. She has been prescribed herbal drugs and a head-and-face massage. She is also told to avoid certain foods.

"I tried Western medicine for five years, but the migraines kept coming every ten days or so, and I had to keep taking pills," she says. "This treatment has been more effective."

The clinic also offers treatments including massage, hot compresses, and herbal steam sauna.

Under Dr Pennapa's initiative, similar clinics have been set up in five of Prachin Buri's seven districts and three of Sa Kaew's four districts.

Three years ago, Dr Pennapa's research took her to Baan Tha Song Khon in Isan's Maha Sarakham Province. She spent two weeks there learning an ancient Isan language from Phor Chan Kane Lawong, an 81-year-old folk scholar and medicine man.

Dr Pennapa spent the next year translating a manuscript written by him,

which was published under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Health and the Dhamma Namai Foundation founded by Prof Ouay Ketusingh.

When the NITTM was set up last October as part of the government's policy to support Thai traditional medicine, Dr Pennapa was delighted with what she sees as a long-term commitment from the public sector. "The institute has turned our traditional medicine from a bastard child into a registered one," she quips.

Dr Pennapa was the natural choice to be the institute's first director. As the institute is located in Nonthaburi, she will relocate to Bangkok next year to fill the position.

"These clinics in Prachin Buri should have no problem continuing successfully. They have proved their usefulness," she says.

Thai traditional medicine, explains Dr Pennapa, differs from Western medicine in that it takes into consideration environmental, social, and spiritual factors related to the patient.

"While Western medicine tends to be symptom-oriented, TTM aims to restore the balance of elements in body and mind to help strengthen patients' immunity against disease."

TTM also recognises the influence of changes in temperature and the position of the sun, moon and stars on people's health.

"But this doesn't mean that traditional Thai medicine is capable of treating every illness. Rather, we must select the parts of it that are effective and appropriate for today.

"Also, we deserted our folk wisdom in favour of Western medicine over a century ago. Certain aspects of it, such as names of illnesses, are outdated."

Approximately 70 per cent of common illnesses, she advocates, can be effectively treated by TTM, making it a viable alternative to Western medicine.

Some illnesses -- contagious diseases and those requiring organ transplants, for example -- have been successfully treated by Western medicine and should be left in the hands of Western-style physicians. Others, she says, have been deemed "incurable" by Western medicine but have been successfully treated with traditional-style medicine.

Finally, she says, "There are the illnesses like AIDS for which neither type of medicine has found an effective treatment. We should give, both sides the opportunity to find the cure."

In Thailand, there are currently over 100,000 people with varying degrees of knowledge of Thai traditional medicine, she says.

"Why not train and enlist these people to help shoulder some of our healthcare burden?"

In the West, she says, people have long turned to various branches of traditional medicine for alternative cures. And of late, educated Thais have followed suit.

"As people become more educated, they are beginning to understand the negative side-effects of Western medicine."

In the past, only the rural poor used traditional treatments. Now, their faith has shifted to Western medicine, she says.

"The trend has reversed -- it's now educated city folk who want to use medicinal herbs like 'fah talai chone', 'saled pangporn', 'kamin chan', and 'wan hang jorakae'."

Dr Pennapa's fight for universal acceptance of Thai traditional medicine

has taught her to combine the old with the new. With PenDiag, she has adapted the precious `pah sin' to shine in today's wardrobe.