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The Chem-TCM is the most comprehensive database of its kind and translates more than 12,000 chemicals from more than 300 Chinese herbs used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) into Western terminology.

"Future researchers will now be able to better understand the chemical basis of remedies that have been in use for thousands of years," says David Barlow of King's College London (KCL), who has helped to develop the database.

TCM chemicals are rarely used as raw materials to develop Western drugs because their complex nature makes the registration process difficult.

The database may also answer one of TCM's regulatory challenges in the United Kingdom. An EU directive came into effect in the UK this May that makes it illegal for individual practitioners to sell TCM over the counter, except for varieties registered with the UK drug safety watchdog, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Agency.

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