



A physician at a traditional Chinese medicine centre applies acupuncture to a patient (Photo: Justin Ong)

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SINGAPORE: A traditional Chinese medicine practitioner agreed to open her clinic to treat the son of a long-time customer during the "circuit breaker" period, when all non-essential businesses were ordered to shut.

She later treated more customers, seeing five people in all during the circuit breaker and illicitly opening her clinic in Jalan Bukit Ho Swee.

But one of her customers was unhappy with the services provided, and her husband informed the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) about the TCM practitioner's breach.

For her offences, Nie Xin, 46, was fined S\$10,500 by a court on Wednesday (Apr 7).

She pleaded guilty to three counts under the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act of failing to ensure her clinic was closed and leaving her house without reasonable excuse, with another four charges taken into consideration.

The court heard that Nie was a registered TCM practitioner and owned D&N Chinese Treatment Centre in Block 46, Jalan Bukit Ho Swee.

On Apr 6, 2020, the Ministry of Health (MOH) issued a circular to all TCM practitioners that non-essential TCM services and treatment should be deferred for four weeks from Apr 7, 2020.

TCM clinics would be deemed essential service providers only if they provided adjuvant therapy for cancer or other chronic conditions, and practitioners who wanted to continue practising had to notify MOH.

Services such as acupuncture and moxibustion were not allowed as these treatments involved direct or prolonged contact with patients.

But Nie did not make any declaration to MOH.

On Apr 29, 2020, a long-time customer asked Nie to treat her nine-year-old son. Nie initially said her clinic was closed, but later arranged to meet the pair at her outlet.

Her lawyer said she had acceded to the request to open her clinic because of their long-standing relationship, and because she was worried the boy's health would deteriorate.

That same day, she accepted another appointment from a different customer - a 35-year-old woman complaining of pain in her waist.

Nie first checked the boy, diagnosing that he had dampness in his body, and prescribed him powdered medication. She also checked his mother in the same session, giving her powdered medication, herbal tonic and sticks for moxibustion to improve her sleep.

Nie charged the pair S\$315 for the services and medication. When the 35-year-old woman arrived at the clinic with her husband, Nie used a stick to hit her thigh and forearm for about 40 minutes, before giving her powdered medication and herbal tonic.

She charged the woman S\$325 for the session.

THEY SOUGHT EXORBITANT SUMS OF MONEY FROM MY CLIENT: DEFENCE

According to Nie's lawyer, the woman approached her for a refund as her symptoms allegedly worsened. Nie refunded her the money in full, but was "continually harassed" by the woman and her husband.

"They sought exorbitant sums of money for compensation and made constant threats," said lawyer Nicole Huang, adding that Nie became "riddled with anxiety" and lost weight.

The incident was flagged to the authorities in May 2020, when the woman's husband sent an email to MTI saying that Nie had provided unauthorised services during the circuit breaker.

Investigations revealed that Nie had left her home three times during the same period, on Apr 11, Apr 23 and Apr 29 to see five customers at her clinic, charging them a total of S\$1,070.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Sruthi Boppana asked for a fine of at least S\$11,500, saying that Nie was well aware that she was not allowed to practise during that period, and had benefited financially.

The judge said that the interactions were close and potentially at a higher risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Nie could have been jailed up to six months and fined up to S\$10,000 for each charge of breaking a COVID-19 law.

Further checks with the Attorney-General's Chambers showed that no action was taken against the patients.

Source: CNA/ll

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