The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about Ebola

治 (Putonghua pronunciation: zhi4, Cantonese pronunciation: ji6)
Meaning: cure, heal, manage, govern, control, curb, order, rule

治 (radical 亻 = 水 shui3, water) means treat/control: 治水 (zhi4 shui3 = control/harness-water/floods), 治家 (zhi4 jia1 = manage-family-budget-affairs), 治國 (zhi4 guo2 = rule-country), 治安 (zhi4 an1 = control-security/peace = law and order) is police’s responsibility.

Doctors 治病 (zhi4 bing4 = treat-illnesses), prescribe 放射線療法 (fang4 she4 xian4 liao2 fa3 = release-shoot-rays-heal-method = radiation therapy), 化學療法 (hua4 xue4 liao2 fa3 = chemistry-study-heal-method = chemotherapy) to 根治 (gen1 zhi4 = fundamentally/thoroughly cure) cancer patients. Some 治癒 (zhi4 yu4 = heal-cure = are completely cured), some 不治 (bu4 zhi4 = not-cured = die).

上醫治未病 (shang4 yi1 zhi4 wei4 bing4 = top/best-doctor-treat-not-yet-ill = prevention is the best cure) is ancient Chinese medical wisdom.

by Diana Yue