

# Chinese medicine: lives, not diseases

From Nghia Thanh Tran

I WAS PLEASED TO READ an interesting debate between five highly respected practitioners in the *Journal of Chinese Medicine* (issue No. 90). “Chinese Medicine in the West 2009” addressed many issues and I do believe it is important that we look at the changing nature of TCM as society evolves. However, while many important points were raised, the loss of traditional practice was never discussed. We should be considering the detrimental effects of modernising Chinese medicine.

Addressing the way TCM is practised in the West, Hugh MacPherson pointed out that in the UK, separate conferences are held for Chinese and Western practitioners of TCM, indicating a clear divide. This occurs less in Australia, and I would suggest that there are deeper divisions than race in our profession. There is a division in the way TCM is practised and understood.

Many practitioners view TCM through the eyes of modern science. Practitioners around the world have set about proving the benefits of TCM using modern science and evidence-based practice. This may be a majority view, but I do not believe the majority is correct.

A small minority of practitioners go about treating their patients in the ancient way – as TCM was meant to be. These practitioners live and breathe TCM. It is their way of life. They live as ancient practitioners did, practising complete medicine: acupuncture, herbal medicine, tai chi and spiritual cultivation. They do not try to prove that TCM works; the proof is in its 2000-year existence.

As more people have sought help from TCM, many schools have been created. Those experienced in the field are educating the next generation, just as was done in ancient China where a practitioner would pass his knowledge on to his apprentice. Well, actually, in ancient times, an apprentice would spend years

or even decades under the guidance of a master. And with experience, the apprentice would gain stature and eventually become a master. In today’s TCM schools, students are taught as they would be in a medical school.

When TCM is taught in this way, the result is a tendency to focus on a biomedical diagnosis. Practitioners learn to use the patient’s Western diagnosis then create a checklist of possible TCM patterns that could cause that disease. They then follow the usual diagnostic procedures, narrowing that broad base to a point, the final TCM diagnosis. This method is completely flawed as it relies, firstly, on the patient being correctly diagnosed by Western medicine. How can TCM practitioners confirm that diagnosis?

In ancient China, TCM masters did not have the benefit of modern science yet practised effectively. In treating a patient’s ailment, they treated the whole patient. They did not narrow it down and treat a headache. They stepped back and treated a life, thereby relieving the headache. This is what is unique about TCM.

In the modern world, where people are overworked and stressed, everyone is after a quick fix. Where Western medicine cannot provide this, patients seek it from TCM. Influenced by their training and pressured by patients, practitioners step away from traditional Chinese medicine and practise modern Chinese medicine. This does not help anyone, especially our patients. The only way to practise traditional Chinese medicine is to fully embrace it, trust in it and live it. Tai chi and meditation are important practices that can help practitioners return to traditional understanding and become better clinicians.

In addressing the role of Chinese medicine in the West in 2010, we as practitioners need to remember our role as doctors of traditional Chinese medicine, and provide our patients with what is unique about TCM: treating lives, not diseases.

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