

Chinese Medicine in the West: A Different Perspective

I was pleased to see the publication of an interesting debate between five respected and experienced practitioners in the Journal of Chinese Medicine, issue number 90, June 2009. "Chinese Medicine in the West 2009" attempted to address many issues from several viewpoints. I do believe it is important that we address the changing nature of TCM as society evolves. However, several important points were raised and yet amongst them, the loss of traditional practice was never discussed. In this article, I discuss the detrimental effects of modernising Chinese Medicine and the need to step back into traditional methods. I would like to offer a different approach, a different viewpoint, a different interpretation of TCM, and how it can be used in today's world. Modernising is not the only way to approach TCM.

It is part of nature to divide and unite

In addressing the way TCM is practiced in the Western world, Hugh MacPherson raised some important points. He identified that in the UK, there is a clear divide between Chinese TCM practitioners and Western TCM practitioners, whereas in Australia, there is a unity between practitioners of all races. This is an interesting point; however, it is a superficial view of TCM in the Western world. There are deeper divisions outside of race or socioeconomic class. There is a division in the way TCM is practiced and the way TCM is understood.

The majority of TCM practitioners view TCM from the eyes of a person educated in modern science with evidence-based thinking. Many will believe this is the only way we can view anything in the modern world. Every time we see something, we want to know that it is real, we want to know why it exists. It is in the nature of the modern human psyche to question, analyse and investigate. This is perfect for modern medicine. How can we know something works without proof... we can't.

TCM has been in existence for at least 2000 years. Its inception was in a primitive time, where there were no microscopes, no knowledge of molecular biology, no knowledge of p-values and randomised controlled trials. TCM has nearly been destroyed on several occasions. In recent years, with raised expectation of modern medicine in the community and a perceived higher fail rate of modern medicine, TCM has made a resurgence. Now we have TCM in the western world in 2010.

The views of the many find it hard to accept TCM as it was conceived all those years ago. The desire to succumb to modern man's inquisitive nature was too strong, and TCM practitioners around the world have set about proving the benefits of TCM using modern science, modern evidence based practice. Although this is the majority view, I do not believe the majority is correct.

The real divide in TCM in today's world, is the way it is viewed. There is a small minority of voiceless practitioners who go about their practice, treating their patients in the ancient way, the way TCM was meant to be. These practitioners live and breathe TCM. It is their way of life. They live as the ancient

practitioners did, practicing complete medicine: acupuncture, herbal medicine, Tai Chi and spiritual cultivation. They do not try to prove TCM works. The proof is in its 2000 year existence.

Perhaps this is the answer to Peter Deadman's question "What is unique about Chinese Medicine?" It is an ancient art and a way of life that cultivates good health. It is not a scientific approach to curing disease.

Moving into the future

As more people have sought help from TCM, the need for more practitioners has increased. To respond to this need, several TCM schools have been created. Those experienced in the field have lent a hand in educating the next generation, to ensure that knowledge is passed on, just as was done in ancient China, where one TCM practitioner would pass his knowledge onto his apprentice. Well actually, it is not exactly the same. In ancient years, a young apprentice would spend years and decades under the guidance of his master, learning everything there was to know about TCM. And with experience, the apprentice would gain stature and eventually become a master. In today's TCM schools, students are taught as they would have been in medical school. The modern approach to education is needed in today's world. But using this method, the emphasis on experience and one-on-one teaching is lost.

When TCM is taught in this modern way, it is hard to escape modern scientific thinking. The result is a key difference in the approach to TCM. Where ancient practitioners treat the whole patient, cultivating good health, modern practitioners concentrate on curing the patient's one complaint.

In diagnosing patients, modern medicine starts broadly, a differential diagnosis is formed and further history, examination and investigation allow the doctor to narrow that broad base to a point, the final diagnosis. TCM is not like modern medicine and yet the diagnostic approach being used and taught to students is based upon this model. Practitioners are taught to use the patient's western medicine diagnosis to determine what the corresponding TCM disease is. Knowing the western medicine disease, the practitioner creates a list of possible TCM conditions that could cause that disease. They then follow the usual diagnostic procedures, narrowing that broad base into a point, the final TCM diagnosis. There are a few problems with this method. Even if the modern interpretation of TCM is the correct approach, this diagnostic method is completely flawed. It relies on the patient being correctly diagnosed with a western medicine disease. How can TCM practitioners, with no training in modern medicine, confirm that the patient's diagnosis is correct? Where is the evidence? The other problem occurs when the patient presents with multiple western diagnoses. What if the TCM differentials do not overlap? In this scenario, the broad base narrows to the single point of practitioner confusion.

My view of TCM, is that it should co-exist with modern medicine, not as a part of modern medicine, but as a separate entity. TCM is different to modern medicine. It is not better, it is not worse. It is just different. It is based upon ancient theories, proven over time, not able to be proved by science.

Peter Deadman is correct. TCM is unique. The very essence of TCM is unlike anything else that exists in today's world. It is for this reason that practitioners constantly try to liken it to modern medicine; whether that be in proving its effectiveness, or diagnosing patients. It is difficult for practitioners to understand how fundamentally different TCM is. If we all understood this, it would change the way we practice, and it would help our patients much more.

In ancient China, TCM masters did not have the benefit of modern science or modern medicine, and yet they practiced their form of medicine effectively. In treating a patient's ailment, they treated the whole patient. They didn't narrow down and treat a headache. They stepped back, and treated a life, thereby relieving a headache. They administered acupuncture, herbal medicines, advised dietary change and exercise. They treated a disease by changing a lifestyle. This is what is unique about TCM.

In the modern world, where people are overworked and highly stressed, everyone is after a quick fix. Where western medicine cannot provide this, patients seek it from TCM. Practitioners, influenced by their training and pressured by their patients, step away from **traditional** Chinese medicine and practice **modern** Chinese medicine. This does not help anyone, especially our patients. The only way to practice traditional Chinese medicine is to fully understand it, trust in it and live it. Tai Chi and meditation are important parts of the TCM lifestyle, that can help practitioners return to traditional practice and become better practitioners.

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