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Can Western Medicine Accept Chinese Medicine?

By Brian B. Carter, MS, LAc

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Q: My doctor is skeptical of Chinese medicine. Is there a way to make it acceptable to the western medicine way of thinking?

A: This is a complicated issue. Ideally, we could use scientific research to make this possible. This has been done to some extent. However, there are still problems with research and its acceptance.

Not Testing Authentic Chinese Medicine

Studies often diverge from authentic Chinese medicine methodology. Investigators rarely make use of pattern discrimination, which is fundamental to Chinese medicine. Also, studies have yet to acknowledge another reality of CM – its plurality. There are many ways to practice it, and many many herb formulas, herb combinations, acupuncture point combinations, and needling techniques.

See What You Want To See

Plus, studies of people reading and using studies have proven that when we disagree with a study's conclusions, we are much more critical of its methodology and validity than when the results agree with our beliefs. That is a breakdown in the scientific method. In the scientific method, we let study outcomes revise our beliefs – not the other way around.

The Good Research That's Out There

If you want to see good acupuncture research, and great commentary by an MD who devotes his medical practice fully to acupuncture, and who studies authentic CM, go to Acubriefs.com.

I did a short review of the best acupuncture studies since the 1997 National Institutes of Health statement.

Effectiveness and Proof are Secondary

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An interesting twist: Historian and anthropologist Paul Unschuld's suggests that the acceptance of any medicine has more to do with how it fits or doesn't fit with the social zeitgeist (spirit of the times). People must understand a medicine in a way that fits with their beliefs and values first. Scientific evidence, and personal experience of effectiveness are secondary.

Acceptance by Western Medicine

But as for acceptance by western docs– it depends on the doc. I doubt the AMA is going to be accepting Chinese medicine as a separate and equally valid medical system. But some individual docs might.

Who Speaks For Western Medicine?

According to Modern Healthcare Magazine, "Not counting medical students and residents, who are lured by deep discounts in annual dues, AMA members account for only about 29 per cent of 726,000 practicing doctors in America."

This raises the question– who represents most doctors? How do we know what they think or want?

I did an internet search, both on Google and Yahoo, for other medical organizations... most of them were state, or country–oriented.

I did find a few others, but their membership numbers may overlap:

The Christian Medical and Dental Associations (CMDA) – 17,000 members
American College of Preventive Medicine (ACPM) – 2,000 members
American Holistic Medicine Association (AHMA) – membership not listed

So even though the AMA represents less than one–third of physicians, it doesn't appear that any other organization has nearly as many members. Perhaps no one speaks for Western medicine.

Pattern Discrimination Isn't So Strange

Besides all the distinct ontology (the study of what exists) like meridians and organ–systems, a fundamentally unique feature of CM (used in China to differentiate CM from WM) is pattern discrimination.

Different treatment for different symptom/sign patterns is not really that strange. Western docs don't give all patients the same antihypertensive drugs, for example. It depends on the patient, and there are specific groupings according to symptoms, signs, and other diagnoses. We do the same thing – just different groupings.

Regardless, many Western docs look down their nose at pattern discrimination. Perhaps they don't think it's scientific enough? They don't see the benefit. It's outside their paradigm.

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Inequality in Credibility and Authority

Chinese medicine's biggest obstacle to making progress politically and in the media is that MD's are seen as the one true medical authority. They are the experts on everything. Pure scientists don't get as much attention, nor do scholars, or Master's degree people. Politicians and journalists both have this perspective. Because of this, our objections (to the actions of AMA, FDA, and drug companies against Chinese herbal medicine) go unheard. We are not seen as being as competent to assess dangers. Nor do they take Chinese docs very seriously. You have to either be an MD or affiliated with a big institution.

So, to summarize, you can't convince some people no matter what. Others will get behind Chinese medicine regardless. Those in the middle will be swayed by the media and their friends.

It's going to take some time for enough of us to have the degrees, affiliations, and willingness to make statements loud enough to be heard above the din of the prevailing winds.

Acupuncturist, herbalist, and medical professor Brian B. Carter founded the alternative health megasite The Pulse of Oriental Medicine (<http://www.PulseMed.org/>). He is the author of the book "Powerful Body, Peaceful Mind: How to Heal Yourself with Foods, Herbs, and Acupressure" (November, 2004). Brian speaks on radio across the country, and has been quoted and interviewed by Real Simple, Glamour, and ESPN magazines.

Herbal Medicine For A Modern World

By Lucy Bartlett

Using herbs to benefit from its medicinal or therapeutic value is commonly known as herbal medicine. Chemical substances contained in the herbal plants can be induced to act upon the body of the person consuming it.

Humanity has known of this form of healthcare based on herbs since ancient times. History is replete with details of cultures benefiting from herbal medicines. It played a vital role in the progress of modern civilization. The early primitive men discovered that the herbs provide not only a cure but also food, shelter and clothing.

Many of the common drugs used by us today are derived from herbs. According to various sources at least one basic ingredient from plant materials form part of some of the prescription drugs available in the United States.

According to WHO - World Health Organization - nearly 80 percent of the worlds population or 4 billion people currently use some aspects of herbal medicine in their health care process. The common element in Native American Indian medicine, traditional oriental medicine, naturopathic, homeopathic and Ayurvedic medicines is herbal medicine.

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Today, for the treatment of high blood pressure, heart disease, asthma, pain, and other problems, a large proportion of commercial medications use substances derived from plants. To treat symptoms of asthma and other respiratory problems, Ephedrine is used. This is an active ingredient in ephedra, a traditional Chinese herb.

The foxglove plant is another example pointing towards the use of herbal extraction by modern medicine. The leaf from this plant is powdered to stimulate cardiac digitalis and provide relief to a large number of heart patients.

Traditional Chinese Herbalism, Ayurvedic Herbalism and Western Herbalism are some of the various systems of herbal medicine prevalent today. Ayurvedic and Chinese Herbalism developed into a successful system to treat various health disorders. Western Herbalism is yet to achieve this level of advancement and remains a system of folk medicine.

Some of the herbs used in Ayurveda are successful in reducing diabetes and cholesterol. In recent years, there is a growth in the use of herbal medicines due to the success stories of St. John's Wort, which replaced Prozac to treat mild depression. In the United States, the popularity of Ginseng and Ginkgo Biloba is rising due to its curing effects.

Herbal medicines can be marketed in US only as food supplements. Without FDA approval, herb manufacturers or distributors cannot make specific health claims.

Lucy Bartlett is a proud contributing author. Find more articles at

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