

By Dr Jeremy Lim, Editorial Board Member

# Traditional Chinese Medicine – Friend Or Foe?

*Contributions in this month's SMA News present markedly different perspectives of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). How should the medical profession regard TCM?*

The editor of the SMA News requested that I focus this month's Insight column on TCM. I plead no expert knowledge of the subject matter and will confine this commentary instead on some thoughts on how we can collectively decide which aspects of TCM are appropriate or inappropriate in local practice.

## How Should We Regard Traditional Chinese Medicine?

While sceptics would scoff the lack of 'evidence' for TCM, I must confess a certain sympathy: The history of Western medicine is replete with examples of how wrong the profession can be and how pig-headed and resistant to innovation we often are. It may not be commonly known but Edward Jenner's paper to the Royal Society on smallpox vaccination, which started mankind on the incredible journey culminating in the eradication of smallpox, was rejected and that Jenner could not find enough subjects to conduct larger trials for the cowpox-derived vaccine. Remember also that Dr Ignaz Semmelweis who advocated so strongly for hand washing to reduce puerperal sepsis died a broken and bitter man, rejected by his peers.

Ultimately, Western medicine has no monopoly on knowledge and we must actively and aggressively



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seek ways to compare Western methods and TCM, finding metrics that can be applied equally to both. This is easier said than done: The World Health Organization recognises that "requirements and methods for research and evaluation are complex" while Dr Lee Tat-Leang in an editorial for a theme issue on Complementary and Alternative Medicines (Nov 2006) writes that "Randomized controlled trials, the gold standard of evidence-based medicine, lend themselves less comfortably to TCM practice, particularly as the practice involves individualized and prolonged treatments". He raises another issue relating to the use of appropriate placebos in TCM trials, asking "What sort of placebo is appropriate for acupuncture?"

Nonetheless, it is possible. In a recent SingHealth Foundation grant call for research in TCM, many Western-trained practitioners partnered with TCM experts to propose clinical trials to robustly examine use of TCM in a multitude of diseases, comparing outcomes relating to physiological measures, biochemical and histological evidence of disease improvement and more importantly, patient satisfaction.

Patients see doctors, Western-trained or otherwise because they want to be restored to



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health or at least have their symptoms mitigated. Hence, regardless of the originating philosophy, the effectiveness of medicine should be measured by how much longer a patient lives and how much better a patient lives.

### **Singapore's Unique Position**

Singapore is positioned at the crossroads of East and West and should take the lead in innovating new research methods to compare Western medicine and TCM. We should be deliberately exposing and educating our medical students and doctors to the concepts of TCM and encouraging collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas with our TCM colleagues, whether through joint educational forums or research grant calls. With greater understanding and respect, we will be

well-placed to critically appraise the different elements of TCM viz-a-viz Western medicine and determine which aspects can contribute effectively to better patient care. Our patients deserve the best, whether it be from the peaks of Western medicine or the unfamiliar ranges of TCM.

I leave you with the wisdom of Dr Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization, who in a speech last year in Beijing at the WHO Congress on Traditional Medicine said, “The two systems of traditional and Western medicine need not clash... they can blend together in a beneficial harmony, using the best features of each system, and compensating for certain weaknesses in each. This is not something that will happen all by itself. Deliberate policy decisions have to be made. But it can be done successfully.”

Will we seize the opportunity? ■