



# Credibility in Medicine

By Dr Ong Siew Chey

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## MEDICAL ADVERTISEMENTS

Lianhe Zaobao reported on 1 August 2005, that China's Minister for Health had declared his plan to introduce legislation to ban all medical advertisements in the country. He cited that since April, 0.39% of all advertisements and 100% of medical advertisements had breached the law by making dishonest or misleading claims. Since then, for unknown reasons, there has been no further development of this issue. However, as reported in Lianhe Zaobao on 2 December 2007, China's Deputy Premier Wu Yi condemned the rampant fallacious advertisements of drugs. She said that by using movie stars

for product endorsements, the misleading advertisements had caused a great deal of harm to the people; she suggested that all the products concerned should be removed from the shelves.

Such incidents can also be seen in Singapore, where advertisements such as enlarging the breast without surgery, injections or use of drugs, growing hair with special concoctions, weight reduction by some near-magical methods and such, have flooded our media from time to time. Television programmes meant for advertisements often expound in a blatantly non-evidence-based way the virtues and effects of traditional Chinese medicine. These programmes

are not always clearly demarcated as commercial advertisements, and viewers may perceive them as being featured or endorsed by the television station. Since the public usually identifies rightly or wrongly with our news media, whatever presented by them carries a great deal of credibility.

One may think that Singaporeans are generally too well-educated to be affected by dishonest advertising. Literacy is not equivalent to education, but education does not naturally connote the ability to think rationally, scientifically and critically. Americans are believed to have such reasonable general level of education, but large groups of people have been influenced to believe in something outrightly absurd or to even commit mass suicide. Brainwashing through repeated exposure is a powerful tool to manipulate the human mind. Once a person is so indoctrinated, the views and values are incorporated into his mind-set and form part of his ego. A person will defend his ego vehemently against any change and unfavorable intrusion.

It is good for the government to promote "health tourism" and liberalise health advertisements. However, we must maintain credibility and make sure we do not become a medical Wild West.

## TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Traditional Chinese medicine is popular in Singapore. It is generally inexpensive and does not involve complicated tests and treatments. It does not require costly sophisticated diagnostic equipment and facilities or intensive advanced training of specialists and sub-specialists. To a significant sector of our populace, simple concepts of *yin* and *yang*, the five elements and the folksy ideas of “heatiness” and “cooling” are easier to comprehend than Western medical concepts. Anecdotal instances of near-miracle cures by Chinese medicine are passed freely by word of mouth among common folk who lack the knowledge needed to understand the multifarious aspects of diseases. The unwavering faith in Chinese medicine is also enhanced by ethnic pride and reinforced by the belief in its mysterious properties.

Following China’s example, our government has incorporated traditional Chinese medicine into our mainstream medical treatment. It has been given official status, and its practice alongside Western medicine is encouraged. Chinese medicine clinics are set up in hospitals, and diploma and degree courses are organised to train practitioners. To my knowledge, the Singapore Medical Association, which is meant to represent all the Western-trained doctors in the country, has never commented on the merits or demerits of the policy.

The degree courses of traditional Chinese medicine in Singapore include such Western biological sciences as anatomy, microbiology, physiology, biochemistry and pathology, albeit of unclear depth and standard. Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine are certified and licensed.

The question arises whether they have to bear the same legal responsibility as Western-type doctors. For instance, are they liable for wrong diagnoses and treatments? Should they bear responsibility for mistreating a serious disease that can be cured by Western treatment? Do the concepts

of medical negligence apply to them? Are they exempted from information transparency, an obligation favoured by the Ministry of Health, and from disclosing their experiences of similar cases, track records, and success and complication rates?

Medicine is a fairly exact science in most aspects unlike certain disciplines, in which two diametrically opposite theories may have equal credibility. In medicine, all theories and practices must have scientific basis and be supported by evidence. It should not be the case that one school requires scientific proof and evidence and the other school is exempt from the need of scientific scrutiny.



## TRUST IN FAITH

I believe that among the measures favoured by the Ministry of Health in managing our healthcare services is the maintenance of affordability. In this respect, traditional Chinese medicine is highly desirable with its low cost.

Many people I know have strong faith in traditional Chinese medicine. When pressed for their reasons, they would usually quote some anecdotal cases or adamantly maintain that 5,000 years of history cannot be wrong or that 1.2 billion people cannot be wrong. The belief is akin to a religious faith that

requires no scientific proof. For example, no lesson is learned from the fact that the human race went through several thousand years of civilisation believing that the earth is flat.

## THE CAUSES OF RESURGENCE OF TCM

Few people understand how traditional Chinese medicine came to be promoted with vigour after communist regime was established in China. In spite of their early remarkable inventions of compass, paper, printing technique, gun power and others, the Chinese generally stopped at their inventions without working out the underlying principles and failed to improve further by scientific methodology.

The Peking Union Medical College, probably the best old school of Western medicine in China, was founded in 1906 through the cooperation between American and British missions and the Chinese government. In 1917, the China Medical Board of the Rockefeller Foundation began to assume full support of the institution. The college produced top-notch graduates who would later serve in the upper medical echelons of China. However, to produce enough doctors for a huge population would take many more medical schools and many more years. Unfortunately, the development of Western medicine in China was soon disrupted by civil wars and the Japanese invasion.

In 1949, the People’s Republic of China under the communist regime was founded. In the early years that followed, the country was ravaged by poverty, famine and its participation in the Korean War; and even providing the people with minimum Western-type health care was out of the question. Chinese herbal medicine was the only option. Although acupuncture is now known to be able to bring about only temporary pain relief with no real curative value, it was vigorously promoted as definitive treatment for its low cost. Esoteric *qigong* treatment also came into vogue. Poorly-trained barefoot doctors were sent to the villages.

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Initially an economic and political necessity, the promotion of traditional Chinese medicine soon took on new significance as a revenue-generating industry when it attracted overseas Chinese to go to China to seek treatment. Export of raw herbs and manufactured herbal drugs began to escalate. As time went on, the practitioners began to claim that Chinese Medicine was “holistic” and could help the body withstand or reap better benefits from Western treatment. These claims were made on no basis.

Historically, traditional Chinese medicine began to take on some semblance of organised form with the advent of the book *Huangdi Nei Jing* or Yellow Emperor’s Internal Medicine, probably edited in the period of Western Han some two thousand years ago. The concepts of *yin* and *yang* and of the five elements were not based on any evidence or proof but seemed to have been conceived out of thin air. Knowledge of human anatomy was rudimentary and inaccurate. Perception of the functions of various body organs was mostly wrong.

In Ming dynasty, Li Shizhen compiled and classified 1892 substances (herbs, minerals and animal parts) used for medicinal purposes in a book complete with prescriptions, hailed as the Chinese pharmacopoeia. Again, no evidence was presented as to how he came to know the properties and pharmacological effects of such a huge variety of substances. Yet these two books are the foundation of traditional Chinese medicine.

Another flaw in the practice of traditional Chinese medicine is the lack of scientifically-based methods of diagnosis. Such simple Chinese diagnostic methods like studying the complexion, feeling the pulse and looking at the tongue are grossly inadequate. When the doctor does not know what disease he is treating and has no valid knowledge of the pharmacological actions of the drugs used, one needs more than faith to trust such a system of practice. Traditional Chinese medical treatment does not exact high financial cost, but it may be false economy. Delay in diagnosis and effective treatment of a serious illness may in the

end cost more and adversely affect the prognosis. A case well known to the Chinese was that of actress Chen Xiaoxu, who came to fame by her portrayal of the character Lin Daiyu in the TV series “Dream of the Red Chamber”. She went for herbal treatment for her breast cancer until it was too late, a clear example on how traditional Chinese medicine needs to be better regulated to safeguard consumers.

It is commendable that the Ministry of Health favours an unlimited diversity of healthcare providers and services in order to allow patients greater choice and to help create innovations. However, the mental and psychological processes of a patient with a serious illness seeking treatment are complex and are influenced by fear, bias, wishful thinking, irrational thinking and poor advice of well-meaning friends and relatives. Not all patients are enlightened; many need to be protected and insulated from healthcare services that are not credible, much the same as unwise investors who should be helped to avoid the pitfall of purchasing attractive but unsound banking instruments. Regardless of the type of health care and philosophical underpinning, it needs to be properly regulated and the consumer protected due to information asymmetry. As long as it is meant to prevent or cure diseases, it must have credibility, rising from formal regulation and organisation, as well as transparency of outcome. **SMA**



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