

Interview with Xuejian Liu, Chinese medicine practitioner

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Introduction

Dr Xuejian Liu worked as a barefoot doctor for five years in the countryside surrounding Beijing, China, before he entered university. He commenced a four year course in Chinese medicine (herbal medicine and acupuncture) in March 1973. He studied western medicine at Capital University of Medicine, Beijing, and Chinese medicine at Beijing Hospital of Chinese Medicine. In the early 1970s the hospital served as a magnet for some of the best clinicians in the 'older' generation, such as Profs. Wang Juyi, He Puren, Yu Shuzhuang on acupuncture, Prof. Zhao Bingnan on dermatology, Prof. Liu Fengwu on gynaecology and Prof. Guan Youpo on internal medicine. Dr Liu had his Chinese medicine training with these well known and experienced practitioners.

After graduation in March 1977 and until 1988 he worked at the Beijing Hospital of Chinese Medicine as a clinician and a lecturer. In 1988 he moved to the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine where he was promoted to assistant professor in 1995. Between 1990 and 1993 he was invited to work at the European Centre for Peace and Development (ECPD), established by the United Nations in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. This period included a lecture tour of Greece and Israel. Since 1997, he has lectured at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia whilst practising as a clinician in private practice. Dr Liu now practises in Wodonga, Victoria.

His specialties include internal medicine, such as respiratory, digestive and immune system problems, side effects from chemotherapy and radiation treatment, and gynaecological disorders such as infertility, menopause and post-menopausal syndromes.

Dr Liu's 32 years experience in Chinese medicine education and clinical practice in various countries might help Australian practitioners, particularly young clinicians, to improve their clinical skills and broaden their knowledge.

We have put two sets of questions to Dr Liu with one set being general questions and the other focusing on acupuncture practice.

The General Questions

What made you choose to study acupuncture?

After graduation I was sent to work at the Beijing Hospital of Chinese Medicine. At the time, there were limited numbers of trained 'young' doctors specialising in acupuncture who were capable of taking on the tasks from the 'older' experts. The president of the hospital decided to select the best graduates for this special position, I was fortunate enough to be selected.

In your opinion, what is the biggest achievement in Chinese medicine in the past 50 years?

Acupuncture anesthesia (representative scholar – Prof. Jisheng Han) and the confirmation of channel transmission (representative scholar – Prof. Zongxiang Zhu).

Prof. Zhu's life research has included a variety of experiments conducted on both animal and human subjects that have shown increased light, sound, and electrical conductivity along the channel pathways. Unlike the Western researchers whose experiments emphasise nerve pathways or the unique anatomical/physiological nature of specific acupuncture points, Prof. Zhu focused on looking at the unique properties of the tissues. He found that there was a measurable difference between conductivity in the tissues along the channel pathways compared with those tissues a few centimetres away which were not associated with any acupuncture channels.

With the rapid developments in western medicine, what is the role of Chinese medicine in a modern society? And for what types of clinical conditions is Chinese medicine more effective?

Modern western medicine has made dramatic achievements in emergency medicine and various surgical specialties. However, there are still many questions to be addressed in internal medicine and psychiatry. In most cases, the exact aetiology of some diseases has not been fully or partially understood. Depression is a very good example.

As a product of millions of years of evolution, the human body is extremely complex, with complicated and sophisticated

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adjustment mechanisms. Due to the wide-spread connections within cells, tissues, organs and systems, the original biomedical model might not be the only or best answer of many human diseases.

Chinese medicine is a model that bypasses some of the microscopic complexity of human bodies and treats disease by enhancing native defensive mechanisms. The result in many diseases is very encouraging.

Western medicine is the mainstream medicine in Australia, but it still cannot cure or effectively treat a lot of diseases such as arthritis, depression, menopause and infectious diseases. These can be managed very well by Chinese medicine.

Many types of clinical conditions can be treated by Chinese medicine effectively such as pain, respiratory problems, digestive disorders, endocrine problems, nervous system problems and cases in menopause which are not responding to HRT or where the use of HRT is prohibited due to risk of cancer.

Please list the diseases/conditions giving you the strongest impression that Chinese medicine is an effective form of treatment. Can you give an example?

Chinese medicine is very effective in the treatment of chronic fatigue syndrome, menopause and depression.

I have a patient with severe depression for 5 years. He came to my practice two years ago. He had a lot of signs and symptoms associated with depression, such as anxiety, moodiness, anger, abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, et cetera.

He had decided to stop taking antidepressants prescribed by his general practitioner because he could not tolerate the side-effects and because his condition was not improving under the medication. I used classic acupuncture point prescription and *jing fang* to treat him. After the first treatment, the patient's condition started improving: the diarrhoea stopped, the abdominal cramps disappeared, he became happier, had more energy, and was less emotional, less moody...After 10 visits, although he felt tired sometimes, nearly all his adverse symptoms had disappeared. His comment was, 'Chinese medicine has given me back my natural feelings'. I have used similar or modified methods mentioned above to treat many patients with depression, and the therapeutic results are very satisfying. I have found acupuncture and some classic herbal formulae such as *Wu mei wan*, *Jiao mei tang*, *Wen dan tang*, *Chai hu jia long gu mu li tang* are natural 'antidepressants', which can be used to treat patients with depression very effectively, with minimal or no side-effects.

What are the most urgent questions we need to address in Chinese Medicine?

The outcome measures need to be addressed. Chinese medicine focuses on subjective feelings reported by patients; whereas the western medicine is more objective, relying on laboratory findings. It is more important that after treatment the patients feel more relaxed, happier, calm, and clear headed with reduced pain. Many often comment that they feel 'normal' again and that the quality of life has improved for them. We may not need to rely on laboratory tests or findings to 'prove' that the patient is or is not getting better.

What are the main mistakes that Chinese medicine doctors are making?

In my opinion there are three main mistakes.

1. Many practitioners are constrained by the western diagnosis, resulting in treating patients from a western medical point of view with too much emphasis on laboratory results/findings.
2. Some young practitioners underestimate learning from experienced teachers/mentors.
3. Some practitioners underestimate learning from the classics. They trust modern research, newly published books rather than the classics.

Please give young Chinese medicine doctors some advice on how to study acupuncture and Chinese medicine. For instance, if they have questions, where and how should they find the answers?

You must make notes immediately when you have difficult cases, e.g. after a few treatments if a patient shows no improvement or a patient showed improvement in the beginning but showed no further improvement later on.

Then you must find answers from books, teachers or your own previous experience. If you wish to be a good practitioner, you should have at least 1000 Chinese medicine books on acupuncture and herbal medicine in English or Chinese

What types of books should one have? Please list the top five books that everyone should read.

Both classic and experiences from current practitioners should be read. Here are the top five books that I think everyone should read and keep a copy of.

1. Miraculous Pivot (灵枢经)

2. AB Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion (针灸甲乙经) by Huang Fumi.
3. Acupuncture Odes: Ode to the One Hundred Symptoms (百症赋), Jade Dragon Classic (玉龙赋), Ode to the Importance of Penetrating the Dark Mystery (通玄指要赋), Ode to the Streamer out of the Dark (标幽赋), Ode of Xi Hong (席弘赋).
4. Applied Channel Theory In Chinese Medicine: Wang Ju-Yi's Lectures on Channel Therapeutics by Wang Ju-Yi and Jason D Robertson.

I highly recommended this book! Prof. Wang Ju-Yi graduated from Beijing University of Chinese Medicine in 1962, he worked as a doctor in acupuncture at Beijing Hospital of Chinese Medicine for 22 years, as professor and chief editor of the China Journal of Acupuncture and Moxibustion at the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine for 12 years, and served as president of one of Beijing's largest hospitals for two years. I worked as doctor of acupuncture under his supervision at the Beijing Hospital of Chinese Medicine for three years and at the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine for another five years.

Applied Channel Theory in Chinese Medicine is a most valuable and useful book for all acupuncture clinicians, either experienced practitioners or young graduates. Prof. Wang's outstanding explanation of the classics, his personal experiences in the differentiation of syndromes, his clinical application of the Five Shu Points, his successful cases, his unique and powerful point pairs, all of these will help you to meet with success in clinical practice. It should be one of the top five books on your desk!

Books published in 20th century or later

- Selected Clinical Experiences of Acupuncture and Moxibustion (针灸临床经验辑要) by Jiao Guorui.

This book includes the most important clinical wisdom and experiences of famous acupuncturists and moxibustionists between 1949 and 1977. This book is in Chinese.

- Serial publications: One Hundred Outstanding Chinese Medicine Clinicians in the 20th Century (中国百年百名中医临床家丛书) published by National Bureau of Chinese Medicine.

The series was written by very well known Chinese medicine physicians, dermatologists, gynaecologists, paediatricians, and acupuncturists e.g. Pu Fuzhou, Qian Boxuan, Song Zuomin, Zhao Bingnan, Cheng Dan-An, and Yang Jiasan.

Could you please give us a personal example about how you do this in your clinic?

I personally like treating patients during the day and enjoy my time reading in the evening from my collection of several thousand books related to Chinese medicine. I take notes on case studies and especially the formulae and acupuncture points used. Other's experiences must be tested in the clinic. I also carry a small note book in my pocket all the time, a habit I learned from old generation of medical experts (Pu Puzhou, Zhang Xiaoqian), I take notes that I will review later. It may be a little extravagant but any book or publication that I think 'important', I often obtain two copies of it. One I keep in my library and the other I keep in my car or in my treating rooms so I can refer to it wherever needed.

How do you deal with 'down time', a time that a practitioner experiences from time to time when he or she has a few bad days and find their therapies are not as effective.

This is a good question. Although I am confident with my diagnosis and my treatment decisions which in most cases end up with favorable results, I do have 'down time' occasionally. Fortunately, it does not happen too often. For example, I have very good results in treating patients with hot flushes. However, I have come across cases where after a number of treatments with acupuncture and herbal medicine, the condition did not improve or worsened. My first reaction is to re-examine the history carefully, making sure that I have made a correct differential diagnosis. I feel that it has provided me with a chance to improve my knowledge in finding effective treatments by reading more books. I will not hesitate to ring up some of my teachers or colleagues (most of them are in China) and discuss the case or cases.

It is also important for me to carefully discuss with the patient so they feel confident with me and happy to continue with the treatments. Actually it is time like this 'down time' that increases my interest in Chinese medicine and makes me realize how diverse and powerful Chinese medicine is.

In fact, after this 'down time', my clinical experience will go up one level higher!

What would you recommend to students studying Chinese Medicine?

For current students learning from outstanding teachers is still very important, it will shorten the time to becoming an experienced practitioner, and avoid mistakes.

If you are not a Chinese speaker and you are younger than 30 years of age, you have to study Chinese, like well-known

Chinese medicine practitioner in Australia, Steven Clavey. I began to study English when I was 28 years old.

Do you have any other advice you would like to tell young doctors?

Read as much as you can, learn from outstanding doctors as much as you can, treat as many patients as you can (approximately 20 patients a week, 1000 a year) and summarise your own successful cases.

Where would you like to see Chinese medicine in 50 years?

I would like to see Chinese medicine (acupuncture and herbal medicine) as popular in the world as it is in China.

Where do you think Chinese medicine will be in 50 years if we continue with the current path?

Herbal medicine will be as popular as acupuncture in the world. Integrated hospitals of Chinese medicine and western medicine will appear in western societies.

Questions about Acupuncture

What are the key factors for a high success rate? Point selection, location, needling techniques?

Correct differentiation of syndrome and point selection, and proper point location and needling techniques, are the key factors.

How do you understand deqi? Do patients have to feel a strong deqi sensation for acupuncture to be successful?

There are two aspects to understand a *deqi* sensation: (a) from the patient's soreness, electrical feeling or warm feeling; and (b) from the practitioner, a sensation like when a fish bites a hook.

When we treat difficult cases we often use the qi flow method to induce qi to a diseased organ or area, the technique will increase your success rate.

For some sensitive or super sensitive patients, especially for their first treatment, strong stimulation should be avoided. If your differentiation and point prescription are correct, you just need to insert the needles at the correct depth, and you may achieve excellent results.

Prof. Wang Juyi said, 'as a doctor, when one treats a patient, that person's channel should be treated delicately and with respect. One should create effects in the channel systems that

are like the music of an experienced musician. Don't beat on the strings or play indiscriminately. A successful treatment should be like conducting a piece of beautiful music.'

How do you understand individual variation in sensitivity to needling?

Different people respond in various ways such as insensitive, normal, sensitive and supersensitive; therefore it is important to treat all patients individually. Usually you will know which type the patient is as soon as you insert the first needle. Use very fine needles and select fewer points for supersensitive patients.

Some people say that Australian patients are more sensitive to needling than Chinese are; and the old school of strong deqi needling does not apply to Australian population well. Given your experience in both countries, what do you think about this comment?

From my own experience, I have not noticed any big difference in needling sensation between patients from different countries. Many patients may not have a strong *deqi* sensation. The importance is that the needles are applied to the right depths, in the right positions; there may only a mild *deqi* sensation, but the treatment should be effective.

What are the key factors for a successful acupuncturist?

One must have adequate knowledge on channel theories especially examination of channels, point prescription and proper needling techniques. One must follow good teachers and learn from them, as the saying goes 'practice makes perfect'.

Could you please give us your thoughts on why many trials find no difference between real and sham acupuncture. Sham acupuncture involves shallow needling or non-invasive needling on non-acupuncture. Deqi is often avoided.

I have not taken much interest in acupuncture studies that are carried out using test methods based on western medicine (evidence based, et cetera), so I may not be the right person to answer such a question. Regardless of the outcome, I believe that results depend strongly on the experience of the person applying the acupuncture needles, the selection of points used and the sample size. In many trials, the test group may have the same western medical diagnosis but according to Chinese medicine, each subject in the group is an individual, so a point formula may not be effective for all participants involved.