

Conference Report

International Forum & Exhibition on the Evidence Based Integration of TCM

Sydney, Australia
21–23 October 2011

Suzanne Grant

The Forum and Exhibition on the Evidence Based Integration of TCM was designed to discuss the potential for greater integration of conventional medicine and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in key areas of pain management, sleep disorders and rehabilitation. The aim was to facilitate communication, research, cooperation and understanding of the potential benefits of TCM.

More than 200 researchers, academics and practitioners from Australia and China gathered for the Forum. A welcome dinner on the Friday night attended by senior practitioners from TCM hospitals and the State Administration of TCM in China was a great opportunity to share experiences. Dr Ross Walker provided an entertaining and informative talk on the many examples of CAM being found to be effective – but, that time and time again these findings are relegated to the back page of the journal and fail to be integrated into ‘mainstream’ medicine, the upshot being that patients often miss out.

Sessions on the Saturday were structured to provide a conventional medicine perspective and a TCM point of view on the key areas. A panel was convened to discuss integration.

Professor Kerry Phelps provided an excellent insight into how integrative

medicine is currently practised in Australia. These range from the ‘integrative’ GP to the integrative medical centres or the systems of referrals between conventional medical practitioners and CAM practitioners. Prof Phelps noted that the medical profession is very conservative and unfortunately building relationships between CAM and conventional medicine would need more evidence for wider usage. Professor Lu Aiping described the way in which TCM is part of the State health system in China and there is almost seamless integration. He also noted that TCM was being rolled out in a community clinic model to locations in China where there is access to little or no other healthcare. Professor Hosen Kiat presented some of the latest evidence of Chinese medicine and CAM in cardiology research. As this evidence continues to grow so too will the acceptance of TCM by the conservative medical establishment. This will take time.

The session on Chronic Pain and Rehabilitation was excellent. There is so much potential here for TCM and mainstream medicine to work together. Prof Philip Siddal, a pain specialist who was also trained in classic Chinese medicine, spoke on why Chinese medicine, in particular acupuncture, has not been taken up by the mainstream medicine in spite of a large number of clinical trials being published. He

considered the key being the quality of evidence. A number of systematic reviews of acupuncture concluded that current trials were of poor quality and small sample sizes. Prof Liqun Jia from Beijing presented his exciting findings from randomised controlled trials of Chinese herbal bath for hand and foot syndrome and peripheral neuropathy in cancer patients caused by chemotherapy. The panel discussion was the highlight of the session. The panel consisted of the two speakers: Dr Winnie Wing-Lee Hong, a pain specialist, and Dr Zhen Zheng, a Chinese medicine practitioner who specialises in pain research. The audience asked when there would be ‘enough evidence’ for Chinese medicine to be considered part of a treatment plan. Where pain medication was unable to provide relief, as was the case for a young girl hospitalised with burns, there is clear place for other modalities such as acupuncture. The panel all agreed that the Chinese medicine profession has been actively engaged in research, and was continuing to develop creative methods suitable to Chinese medicine in order to produce high quality evidence.

In Regulation, Registration and Health Records session, Ms Debra Gillick, executive officer of the Chinese Medicine Board of Australia, talked about the benefits and details of registration. The primary objective of the Board is to maintain public trust and confidence in the Chinese medicine profession and

to protect the public. It will be illegal to use titles such as Acupuncturist, or Chinese medicine practitioner unless you meet the standards set by the Board. The Board is currently working through submissions to finalise these standards and to determine what constitutes acceptable qualifications and experience for registration.

Alongside the Forum, business matching sessions were held. These sessions brought together growers of herbs, manufacturers of herbs and those interested in bringing herbs into the Australian marketplace. Companies and government representatives discussed facilitators and barriers to

product development in Australia. The significant cost of bringing a new herbal product into Australia without any commercial 'patent' over its usage was cited as a considerable barrier.

The Forum was a prelude to the opening of a purpose built Centre of Excellence in Integrative Medicine, which will open in Chatswood late 2012. It is being supported by the New South Wales Government, University of Technology Sydney, University of Sydney, University of New South Wales and various Chinese institutions. The Centre of Excellence in Integrative Medicine is a \$75 million project and is a collaborative initiative of the NSW Government and the

Government of the People's Republic of China. The Centre of Excellence is aimed at holistic patient care, wellness, health prevention and early intervention of chronic diseases. Specialist visiting medical staff and support services will be provided by the Chinese Government, while other partners in the venture, including the universities located in Sydney, will support clinical education and research with PhD students and post-doctoral staff. We look forward to the Centre providing a place for western medicine specialists and Chinese medicine practitioners along with other modalities to work together to build the evidence base.