

## **Doctors and Traditional & Complementary Medicine**

By Dato' Dr Lee Yan San

Seeking alternative treatment has increased mainly by uncontrolled advertising recently. Unfortunately nowadays, patients often seek proper medical treatment too late or do not attend regular follow up for chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension to prevent complications. The practice of western Medicine and the practice of alternative medicine have always been two different entities and are practised separately. However, the Ministry of Health (MOH) is now integrating medical practice.

We often come across Traditional and Complementary Medicine (TCM) practitioners trying to incorporate the practice of western Medicine into their practice such as using stethoscopes, x-rays and western medications. On the other hand, some doctors are going into some fields of TCM.

### **Control of TCM**

1998 was an important year concerning Traditional and Complementary Medicine in Malaysia. There was much concern about the sudden increase in the vast publicity of herbal cures in the media which has tempted more and more people to try such treatment. The government's efforts to stop such an unhealthy publicity were not very successful then. Because of this, there was a sudden surge of interest in herbal therapy not only here but all over the world. In 1998, the MOH formed a Standing committee for TCM to advise them regarding control of TCM in the country. The committee was chaired by the then Deputy Director General of Health and consisted of some health officers from the MOH. Tan Sri Ismail Merican has contributed a lot towards this especially when he was the Chairman of this committee. The standing Committee also included representatives from various TCM bodies. I represented the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) on this committee since its inauguration in 1998 until recently. The Malaysian Medical Council (MMC) was also represented. At the moment, without formal control, anyone can just open a shop and call themselves a TCM practitioner without a need for qualification or proof of training.

The most significant development was the introduction of the TCM Act which hopefully will be implemented soon. Qualified TCM practitioners also welcome this act which will weed out bogus TCM Practitioners. When the Act comes into force, only registered practitioners will be allowed to practise TCM. TCM Practitioner bodies are required to set their standards and criteria that will ensure quality and safe practices. They are required to enforce code of ethics and practices that have been endorsed by the Ministry of Health, through a process of self-regulation. All established TCM practitioners are required to comply with these set standards and criteria of practices. They shall at all times conduct themselves in an honourable manner in their relations with their patients, the public and with other members of the practitioner body. Practitioners shall also at all times abide by their advertising codes. Infringement of the ethical code renders practitioners liable to disciplinary procedure. There will also be a TCM Healthcare Practices Council (like our Malaysian Medical Council for doctors) to ensure control.

Since 1998, the Ministry of Health's Standing Committee on TCM has begun registering traditional practitioners and is drafting a college-level training module for them. MOH has also identified institutions which can train TCM practitioners. Only those who qualify from recognised institutions will be registered and allowed to practise TCM. So far, there are training centres for ayurvedic practitioners overseas and training centres for *sinsehs* both locally and overseas. For example, Chinese physicians have to undergo a four years course of training and an extra two years of apprenticeship before they are officially allowed to practise on their own. TCM practitioners will now be regarded as a true and legal profession.

My father was a very well known *sinseh* (qualified Chinese medical practitioner) who founded the first Chinese medical school in Penang and had contributed to Lam Wah Ee Charitable Chinese Medicine treatment centre. He was very ethical and I remember, if he found that a patient needed Western medicine care such as hypertension, he would ask them to see a doctor instead of attempting something he felt will not be helpful to the patient. He also followed the tradition of only receiving payment in the form of *ang pow* (red packets) for his work and would only open the red packets at the end of the day so that he would not be aware of who gave him which red packet and how much.

TCM practitioners should not practise Western medicine as they are not trained to do so. Some may even use doctor's equipments to con the public to believe that they are at par with doctors.

### **Integration of Medicine**

In 2006, the Health Ministry announced that government hospitals in Putra Jaya, Kepala Batas and Johor Bahru had been chosen to combine modern and traditional treatments as "integrated medicine" with proper control and supervision and will only be introduced on a larger scale if the pilot projects succeed.

Integrated Medicine has been practised in China, India and some European countries. Apparently, over 500 years ago Marco Polo first introduced acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine to Italy. Acupuncture was brought to France through the efforts of George Soulié de Morant, who was engaged in the French diplomatic service in China between 1901 and 1917 and on his return to France, taught clinical applications of acupuncture to French physicians.

The study of acupuncture and herbal medicine is available in Italy only for trained doctors. In UK and Australia also, doctors are allowed to practise acupuncture if they have proof of training. The scenario in the West is very different from the East as Traditional medicine has been practised in the East for ages; way before the arrival of Western Medicine.

### **Doctors and TCM**

Due to the introduction of integrated medicine, some doctors are showing an interest to learn certain forms of TCM to incorporate in their practises. Now TCM will be controlled and thus will be accepted as a proper profession. Doctors therefore have to be careful not to be seen as infringing into another professional discipline.

It must be pointed out that the Medical Act 1971 prevents registered medical practitioners from associating with non-qualified, non-registered practitioners in treating patients. Doctors have to keep to the "modern" treatments for which they are trained and registered but they are allowed to practice "evidenced-based" TCM, such as acupuncture if they show evidence of being qualified to practice it. If any doctor wants to use a traditional product or any TCM method to replace the current form of treatment, they have to show that it is truly evidence-based.

There has been interest for doctors to practise some evidence based complementary medicine. I remember that even as early as in the 1970s there were Western trained doctors going to Taiwan and China to obtain training and diplomas in acupuncture so that they could practise this discipline especially in Australia and the United Kingdom. They did it because they genuinely felt that it would be beneficial to their patients and they did genuinely believe in the value of acupuncture and not just for monetary gain.

In my personal opinion, the Western medical field is already very wide indeed with many disciplines and new techniques to choose from. The field of practice has expanded so much and so wide that individual doctors cannot learn everything and practise them. Thus we see doctors needing to specialise. So one may ask why doctors need to go into another professional's territory and choose TCM to supplement their practice? This should definitely not be a part of a business strategy for monetary gain.

Some doctors I have met told me that they took up certain disciplines of TCM because they have witnessed success in the treatment of their patients by TCM practitioners or that some one close to them have benefited from the TCM treatment given. This reasoning can also be doubtful. As a professional, doctors have to be very careful not to rely on stories of a few successful cases. To be evidence based, it has to be a proper trial which is double blind and proper sampling with enough samples so that it will not be regarded as coincidental. I have practised medicine for over 40 years now and have come across some cases of patients getting better even without taking any form of treatment. One recent example was a patient whom I have not seen for over twenty years who recently returned to consult me. When I reviewed his clinical notes, I noticed that over twenty years ago, when he first saw me, I have advised him to have coronary by-pass surgery done because angiography done at that time showed three blocked coronary arteries. He apparently did not take my advice and did not go ahead with the surgery. I was really surprised that he was still well without symptoms when he recently came to see me for another unrelated problem. The point I would like to make is that if he had received any form of TCM treatment then, which he did not, we would have concluded wrongly on the value of that TCM treatment!

Doctors should only practise what they are trained for and such training should be recognized and accepted by the Malaysian Medical Council to maintain a certain standard of medical practice which is safe and pose the least danger to the unsuspecting public who trust the practitioners.

Doctors should not be tempted to practise anything just for monetary gain. What we practise must be only for our patients' welfare and thus safety must always come first.

Unfortunately, there are doctors who run their clinic like businessman out to make big bucks which often supersede medical ethics and professionalism. Only very recently, a group of professionals comprising mainly architects asked me why nowadays there are doctors calling themselves beauticians, etc using their position as medical professionals and prescribing herbal remedies and doing procedures not normally done by doctors and charging hefty fees for their services to unsuspecting females. The only fair reply I can give them is that if they do find out that what the doctors are doing is unethical and wrong, they should take the trouble to submit a formal complaint to MMC who then can investigate and take the necessary action if they find the complaint valid.

However, doctors who have an interest in certain evidence based TCM and wish to practise them after attending acceptable training courses should certainly be allowed to do so. In my personal opinion, as regards to the use of herbal products, if doctors would like to prescribe herbal medicine, such medicine has to be proven effective and free of side effects by proper trials and thus evidence based and approved by our government. Some doctors have claimed that although the herbal products they have used are not evidence based in the scientific sense, they are only classified as OTC items. I feel that this should not be encouraged in Asian countries where herbal medicine has been practised by TCM practitioners for thousands of years before the arrival of Western medical practice. We should therefore leave it to such practitioners. The scenario is very different in the West where TCM was only introduced much later. In Western countries, those who practise TCM are qualified doctors. Western Medicine was only introduced here in the 20th century and in fact became more popular than TCM only the past 60 years or so.



(Cartoon by: Miss Lee Hai Lin)