



Registered Charity No 1003392

HealthWatch Newsletter

for Science and Integrity in Healthcare

Issue 107, Spring 2018



Alternative therapies

The 'rise and rise' of Traditional Chinese Medicine

When the Australian Government signed an \$18bn Free Trade Agreement with China in 2014, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) was singled out for special attention.(1) However, with no definitive evidence to support claims that TCM can cure any disease or disorder, why is Australia embracing TCM?

TCMs are among the fastest growing 'health' products. The growth of TCM in Australia has been facilitated by both governments, by international agencies, including the World Health Organization (WHO), by our regulators and even by our universities.

TCM is a \$40 billion industry in China.(2) TCM products are among the most profitable of all Chinese exports. However, it has been on the decline in China in recent decades, with some estimating that as many as 80% of Chinese people now rely on western treatments.(3)

In 2016, the State Council released a "Strategic

Development Plan for Chinese Medicine (2016-2030)"(4) seeking to spread knowledge of TCM into campuses, homes and abroad. In July 2017 a new Chinese law, promising equal status for TCM and western medicine, came into effect. Provisions include encouragement to hospitals to set up TCM centres.

China is using its national power "to protect its interests and people overseas; to gain leadership of international governance".(5) Huang Wei, the deputy director of the National People's Congress Standing Committee's commission for legislative affairs, stated "The new law on traditional Chinese medicine will improve global TCM influence, and give a boost to China's soft power".(6)

Traditional Chinese Medicine is not safe. In 2014, 230,000 reports of adverse reactions were received by China's 'National Adverse Drug Reaction Monitoring'. In 2015, DNA analysis of imported TCM products found that

nearly nine in ten contained some form of undeclared substance – including strychnine, arsenic, snow leopard, pit viper, warfarin and Viagra.(7) A 2017 review of nearly 500 TCM products by Hong Kong hospital toxicologists found that most contained modern, pharmaceutical-grade anorectics, stimulants and anti-inflammatories.(8)

The 'Chinese Dream' is to revitalise their nation.(5) Part of their strategy is to initiate children in the traditional practice. Despite many parents' seeing it as useless, and teaching it a waste of precious school time, 12-year-olds are being taught about TCM and how to administer

acupuncture – seen by government as a way to boost confidence and pride in China. Over 700,000 TCM textbooks are being distributed to schools.(9)

Acupuncture is included within TCM, but it doesn't work.

Cochrane reviews are the 'Gold Standard' for evidence-based medicine. Almost 50 reviews have failed to find robust evidence. A rigorously scientific review of the evidence by non-acupuncturists concluded that it was a theatrical placebo.

America's National Institutes of Health looked at 70 systematic reviews of TCM treatments. In 41, the trials were too small or badly designed to be of use. In 29, the studies showed possible benefits, but problems with sample sizes and other flaws meant that the results were inconclusive.(10) Most systematic reviews suggest that there is no good or consistent evidence for effectiveness, but there are too few high-quality studies to make a

"DNA analysis found nine in ten TCM products contained some undeclared substance – including strychnine, arsenic, snow leopard, pit viper, warfarin and Viagra"

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definitive statement. And because negative results tend not to be published, the majority of studies from China report efficacy of TCM.

Acupuncture is practised globally in 103 countries besides China.(11) In the late 1970s, WHO recognised the ability of acupuncture and Oriental medicine to treat nearly four dozen common ailments.(12) Quoted worldwide as “evidence”, a 2002 WHO publication on acupuncture claimed that acupuncture was “clinically proven to be effective” or “effective” for over 90 diseases and disorders.(13) These include depression, dysentery, induction of labour, rotating babies in the breech position, rheumatoid arthritis, stroke and whooping cough.

For the past decade, Margaret Chan was director-general of WHO. A Chinese-Canadian physician, she uses TCM. She urged the Chinese government to promote TCM world-wide, claiming it was a way to “reduce the burden on health services”.

The regulators are supporting TCM claims. As part of the Department of Health, the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration’s role is to safeguard the health of the Australians “through effective and timely regulation of therapeutic goods.”(14) However, the latest proposed changes to their advertising code include over 1000 TCM and traditional indications, such as “Harmonise middle burner (Spleen and Stomach)”, “Unblock/open/relax meridians”, “Balance Yin and Yang”, “Renal tonic” and “Helps healthy liver regeneration”.

Collaboration with Chinese institutions is bringing millions of dollars into our universities. They aim to integrate TCM “research into a clinical setting”, supposedly to “accelerate the development of more effective treatments for the most pressing and costly chronic health problems facing the world”.

Here in Australia, Friends of Science in Medicine has made some progress. The links to the acupuncture report have been removed from the WHO website. Following more than 1,000 complaints by Friends of Science in Medicine (FSM), in July 2017, the Chinese Medicine Board of Australia (CMBA) stated publicly “acceptable evidence to support advertising claims needs to be based on findings obtained from quantitative methodology such as systematic reviews of randomised, and high quality controlled trials.”(15) The Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency,(16) whose role is to support the National Boards in their primary role of protecting the public, is currently assessing 477 complaints about Chinese medicine practitioners’ advertising – representing 10% of CMBA registrants.

With no way to modify TCM practitioners’ scope of practice, however, it will remain ‘business as usual’ for those who venture into their local TCM clinic.

China wants to grow its exports of TCM(17) by influencing governments, universities and regulators. Australian business wants to tap into the \$170 billion global TCM market.(18) At the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress, President Xi Jinping stated that his vision was to “continue to increase our country’s influence”. This is not about improving our health and wellbeing, but about growing Chinese business influence internationally and

boosting the Chinese economy. The chronically ill and other vulnerable patients pay the price.

Loretta Marron

Friends of Science in Medicine can be found at <http://www.scienceinmedicine.org.au/> where you can also subscribe to their e-mail updates and newsletter.

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