An increasing number of our patients are using complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), which has led the WHO to publish its 2002–2005 Traditional Medicine Strategy and The White House Commission to publish its Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy. Both these documents address policies towards the efficacy, quality, and rational use of CAM. In addition, the NIH has established a National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine to study CAM. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is the most commonly used of all the CAM disciplines, and, according to Rao et al., of the 60% to 90% of patients with arthritis who have used CAM, most used TCM as well.

Traditional Chinese Medicine is an ancient Chinese system of medicine that includes meditation, herbal and nutritional therapy, restorative physical exercises and massage and acupuncture. TCM is probably the most organized discipline among all the complementary and alternative medicine disciplines. There are six TCM universities in China, each that offer postgraduate degrees in TCM and there are many TCM colleges throughout China. As of 2004, in British Columbia, Canada, all TCM practitioners are required to be licensed by the College of Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners and Acupuncturists. Passing an Examination is required to obtain the license.

There is some notion that TCM is based on supernatural or cosmology explanation. However the history of the system indicated that it was invented by a culture of people that were tired of listening to shamans trying to explain illnesses through the actions of evil spirits. The system over the years has been subjected to skeptical and extensive analysis and yet the system has still survived thus far. In China, TCM is the main healthcare providing system (not alternative system) and at all major hospitals, TCM and Western Medicine work together to provide care for their patients. It is true that the system is pragmatic and does not necessarily understand the mechanisms of actions. This has hindered its acceptance by the West medical system.

To understand the issues surrounding the use of TCM, it is essential to realize that it is a comprehensive conceptual system that is very different from the Western reductionist and Mechanistic approach to diseases. TCM works around five solid organs—heart, liver, spleen, lung, and kidney—and six hollow viscera—large and small intestine, urinary bladder, stomach, gall bladder, and “triple burners.” These “structures” are connected by conduits and vessels with “qi” (energy) and blood circulating through them. This system is a concept of how the body functions, and the “structures” are not actual anatomical structures as in Western medicine.

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The “qi” and blood are vital substances of life; the function of the solid organs is to store these substances—the hollow viscera act as reservoirs to regulate the circulation of these substances. TCM is a holistic approach, and emphasizes the importance of keeping all the structures functioning harmoniously. A person is considered to be in good health if every “structure” is functioning in harmony with the other structures in the body and with the surrounding environment. To diagnose a condition or disease using Western medicine, the patient’s history, physical findings, and test results are used, and treatment is devised according to the patient’s symptoms or the root cause of the problem. TCM establishes a diagnosis of the individual rather than the disease, and uses a process called syndrome identification, whereby the practitioner makes a dynamic conceptualization of the individual's situation and comes up with a pathophysiologic status (the type of disharmony) for the individual; this status is called “zheng” or “syndrome.” The therapeutics used to restore the harmony within the host and between the host and their environment is determined by the identified syndrome. The theory of TCM diagnosis and management has not been elucidated in Western scientific terms, but the TCM “syndrome identification” process seems to work. Although it is important to understand the theory of TCM, as I think there is a scientific explanation behind it, we should first establish whether or not TCM has an impact on patients.

Alternative medicine is here to stay. Ignoring it or treating it as something outside the normal processes of science and medicine is no longer an option. The challenge is to move forward carefully, using reason and wisdom, as we attempt to separate the pearls from the mud. Although the use of, and interest in TCM is not an indication that TCM is effective, it does show that patients with rheumatic diseases, and perhaps the physicians who treat them, are looking for alternative therapeutic options. Western medicine has not provided satisfactory treatment for all rheumatic diseases, and it is essential that rheumatologists know about TCM in order to better serve their patients.

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If the CRA Treasurer smiles then we can all smile!

“Are Past Presidents allowed to attend CRA/MCR meetings?”

“Is this the way to the beard growing contest?”