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Challenges to Mainstreaming Traditional Chinese Medicine for the 21st Century



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The purposes of this presentation are to review the development of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in the United States and to discuss the potential for and effects of "mainstreaming" TCM into the Western medical culture. There is an ongoing debate in the Traditional Chinese Medicine community of the pros and cons of mainstreaming TCM. Over the last 10 years more and more Western medical educational institutions and hospitals have been including the use of TCM, specifically acupuncture, in their curriculum and treatment modalities. Some educational institutions, for example UCLA, are using a Western medical model and other institutions are adapting a more traditional acupuncture approach. Very few are using traditional herbal medicine as a major treatment modality. As TCM modalities and approaches are being integrated into Western medicine, the TCM curriculum is being challenged to increase Western medicine content and knowledge so that TCM practitioners can participate more fully in the health care system.

Western medicine based institutions and TCM practitioners are looking at a variety of issues with this unique integration and cross-fertilization. Issues of legalization and certification of practice, integrity of practice based on one's basic preparation, safety, efficacy, research methodology and data, and compensation for services are of major concern. I will address each of these.

There are now over 40 states that have legal jurisdiction over the practice of acupuncture with over 15,000 licensed practitioners. The scope of practice in some states is more inclusive of the use of other treatment modalities such as the use of Traditional Chinese Herbal medicine or oriental physiotherapy. This societal acceptance of TCM has occurred over the past 25 years, the majority of the legislation being enacted after 1985 with the inception of the national certification organization N.C.C.A.O.M.

Who are the acupuncturists? Who should be called an acupuncturist? These are some of the questions that have arisen with the tiered system that has inevitably arisen from the development of acupuncture in the US. Chiropractors, physicians, nurse practitioners, and detox acupuncture specialists are using acupuncture in different ways. Within the professional organizations there are debates about the definition and knowledge base necessary to determine the practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The historical development of HMOs and managed care has had a restraining effect on the practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine. The environment of the Western medical care system also takes on a certain color, which influences the practice of TCM in that environment. Do we lose a certain body of knowledge or a system of practice in order to fit the need for "mainstreaming"? How would the Western medical institution adopt the variety of TCM modalities? What terminologies are to be used in the field to reflect accurate

assessment and diagnosis? Scope of practice varies from state to state and institution to institution. What is the best model to be adapted in the Western medical institution for the patients' care: the N.I.H., W.H.O. or T.C.M. model?

This professional schizophrenia is reflected in the philosophical differences among TCM's professional organizations that is driving different agendas and causing some fractionalization of the profession. The acupuncture field is reaching a level of diversity in the US that may bring a new understanding of this "traditional practice", as it has in China - a mixture of Western and Traditional Chinese medicine.

Consumer alarm about the contaminated preparation of patent herbal formulas has again reached a level that demands scrutiny of the production and sale of those products. The role of governments and manufacturers in safeguarding consumers' health needs to be clearly defined. And the role of the practitioner in protecting patient health must be reinforced: the first rule of any medical practice is to do no harm.

Research and efficacy go hand in hand. The recent NIH consensus report has given acupuncture a legitimate place in the world of science. The question of what is the best legitimate research method is constantly debated in the TCM research community. Models of research and joint research are critical to further the acceptance and development of TCM.

Appropriate financial compensation is a necessary goal for TCM practitioners. The relationship of the TCM practitioners with Western medical models, insurance companies, and government agencies set the reimbursement expectations for TCM practitioners. of immediate concern is the answer to the question of who is the gatekeeper for primary care and access to TCM.

These issues are all critical to the successful promotion of TCM to its rightful place in health care for the next millennium. As a profession of health care providers, we must be thoughtful and futuristic in how we respond to these challenges.