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Integrating the Best of Chinese and Western Medicine – A New Paradigm for Health Promotion and Patient Care



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"All forms of medicine aim to ease human suffering and improve quality of life; they differ only in their approaches to the realization of this goal. The blending of Eastern and Western approaches to health and healing can maximize the safety and effectiveness of care in an accessible and affordable manner."

The field of medicine is at its most critical turning point since the introduction of the mechanically- and technology-based, reductionistic approach to health and disease of the industrial era. Health policy based on the biomedical model early last century was designed to prevent and alleviate pain caused by acute infections and two chronic infections - syphilis and tuberculosis. In the last century, medical practice and research, which has remained mainly modeled on acute disease, has led to stunning successes in combating acute injuries and infections and in the prolongation of life (with varying degrees of quality) with potent drugs, surgeries, dialysis machines, prosthetic devices and organ transplantations. However, due to these successes of modern medicine, our aging society is now struggling in its battle against chronic disease. The paradigm that made biomedicine so effective the past few decades is now impeding its successfully meeting the challenges of chronic disease. At the same time, there is also growing public dissatisfaction with the high cost and unacceptable risk of iatrogenesis associated with conventional care.

The current need for fundamental health care reform, the cry for more humanistic and personalized care, increasing emphasis on self and preventive care, the shift from training less narrow, overspecialized experts to more broad-based scholarly generalists and the growing, societal and academic interest in body/mind medicine, nutrition and complementary medicine are different manifestations of the massive changes occurring as a result of a shift from the reductionistic/mechanistic paradigm to a more holistic/systemic paradigm. Concerns are now being raised regarding the quality of prolonged lives and in functional status.

In contrast to the analytical, reductionistic approach of modern western medicine, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) emphasizes a holistic approach to the person by focusing on health cultivation, function, maintaining homeostatic reserve and minimizing factors that lead to dysregulation and abnormal flow. Hence, the strengths of traditional Chinese medicine compensate for the weaknesses of western medicine. A model of medicine based on an integration of the best aspects of these healing traditions, flexible enough to meet the needs of different societies and individuals, can therefore be developed.

Establishment of the Center for East-West Medicine at the UCLA School of Medicine represents our efforts to develop, promote and offer access to the public this emerging, integrative East-West medical paradigm. The Center has four main components: clinic, research programs, education programs, and information exchange. The Center's clinic has become one of the most successful clinical programs at UCLA since its inception six years ago.

The clinic distinguishes itself from other programs at UCLA with its integration of TCM principles and techniques with those of modern medicine at all stages of patient management, from health promotion to treatment of difficult clinical problems. Clinicians well versed in both conventional medicine and TCM work in unison throughout the diagnostic and therapeutic process. An individualized patient management plan, incorporating the best of conventional and TCM approaches, can then be designed. TCM therapeutic approaches include acupressure and acupuncture, dietary and herbal supplements and Tai Chi/Qi Gong exercises. An integrated therapeutic approach with careful monitoring of the patient using both medical traditions ensures improved outcome and safety. Special care is also taken in the prevention of adverse interactions among drugs, herbs, acupuncture and disease, which may occur when a patient receives herbal or acupuncture treatment without the knowledge of his or her physician. This integrative approach has allowed us to help solve or alleviate many medical conditions such as chronic pain, chronic fatigue, and refractory symptoms such as nausea and dizziness. We have also been able to treat patients who are intolerant to drugs, fail surgery/medical therapy, and/or are unable to undergo surgery. A few representative cases to illustrate the concept of integration will be discussed.

As we face a developing crisis in our health care system, a new vision is needed as we plan ahead. Incorporating TCM concept and techniques that have proven to be safe and effective will lead to a solution to recent concerns about the high cost of medical care, the safety of modern drugs, as well as the widespread nature of iatrogenesis. Merging the best of both traditional Chinese and western healing traditions results in an emergent health paradigm that will be better able to meet the health care needs of society in a safe, effective, accessible and affordable manner.