Chinese Medicine in Australia

by Charlie Changli Xue & David Story

Introduction

The origins of Chinese medicine in Australia, including acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, date from the mid-19th century, when substantial numbers of immigrants from China, and other countries, were attracted to Australia by the gold rush. The Chinese medicine practices introduced at that time persisted without substantial change, until the last few decades of the 20th century, when a policy of multiculturalism was introduced into Australia, bringing about a further significant increase of Asian immigration. Coinciding with this increase, the usage of Chinese medicine in Australia rose dramatically. Initially, the increase was largely restricted to Chinese and Asian communities; however, over the last 15 years, the broader Australian community has enthusiastically embraced Chinese medicine. A national survey in 1995 indicated that Chinese medicine was used by all age groups for a wide range of clinical conditions. It also revealed that the majority of consumers of Chinese medicine were well educated and that more females than males sought Chinese medicine therapies. Other indications of the growing popularity of Chinese medicine in Australia include increased importation of Chinese herbal medicines, the number of western medical practitioners incorporating acupuncture into their clinical practice, and offerings of diploma and degree programs in Chinese medicine by a number of public-funded universities and private educational institutions. Responding to the increasing use of Chinese medicine the government of one Australian state, Victoria, has introduced statutory regulation of Chinese medicine practice. Other state governments are likely to follow the Victorian Government’s lead.

This short paper will outline the current status of Chinese medicine in Australia and a number of examples will be used to elucidate these developments.

Chinese Medicine Education

The history of Chinese medicine education in Australia dates back to the 1840s; however, the most significant developments have occurred in the last decade of the last century. There are now four public-funded universities in Australia that offer degree-level training programs in Chinese Medicine, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University, University of Western Sydney, University of Technology Sydney and Victoria University of Technology. In addition, at least ten private institutions provide diploma, advanced diploma and degree programs in acupuncture and/or Chinese herbal medicine.

Leading the educational developments in Chinese medicine in Australia was the introduction by RMIT University in 1996, of the first, and still the only double bachelor degree program in Chinese medicine and human biology. The program was the result of three years of detailed investigation of the demand for Chinese
medicine practitioner training in Australia, the healthcare systems of China and Australia, public, professional and government perceptions and attitudes to Chinese medicine and of options for curriculum design, program content and teaching methodologies. The outcome was a comprehensive program, incorporating Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture. The program has a commitment to evidence-based practice in the context of the Australian healthcare system, but at the same time retaining the integrity of the theoretical framework of traditional Chinese medicine. Development of the RMIT program involved leading Chinese medicine practitioners in both Australia and China, academic staff from Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine of China, and the Chinese Government. To ensure evidenced-based practice and to promote integration with western medicine, knowledge and skills in Chinese medicine are developed on a base of medical sciences and are integrated with western medicine diagnostic principles and practice. An important component of the program is the provision for students to undertake advanced training in the Clinical School of Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. The critical alignment of education and scientific research is also recognized in the program with students being introduced to research methodologies and recent advances in knowledge in areas relevant to Chinese medicine. Indeed, some graduates of the program have commenced formal research training (Masters and PhD) programs in Chinese medicine. So far there have been 150 graduates of the RMIT undergraduate Chinese medicine program. As an acknowledgement of this successful development in Chinese medicine, it is cited in the Encyclopaedia of Chinese Medicine, published by the Chinese Government.

RMIT University remains the largest provider of Chinese medicine education in Australia. After ten years of operation, RMIT Chinese Medicine now offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate educational programs in acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. In addition, it provides research training in programs leading to masters and PhD awards.

**Chinese Medicine Research**

Chinese medicine research is at an early stage of development in Australia. Most of the research is undertaken in universities, particularly those offering educational programs in Chinese medicine. Two universities have established research centers dedicated to Chinese medicine research. RMIT University has established the RMIT Chinese Medicine Research Group, and the University of Western Sydney has established the Centre for Complementary Medicine Research. Much of the research being undertaken is directed to establishing the efficacy and safety of Chinese medicine therapies, and to investigating mechanisms of action of herbal formulae and their components. However, the scope of research extends to socio-economic and demographic studies on the use of Chinese medicine in Australia. Recently, the State Government of Victoria provided AUD$500,000 as a seeding grant to establish the Australian Research Centre for Complementary & Alternative Medicines (ARCCAM). The objective of the new Centre is to draw together the basic and clinical research skills and expertise needed to facilitate research in complementary medicine, particularly Chinese medicine, the ultimate objective being to promote evidence-based clinical practice in complementary medicine and, perhaps paradoxically, to use traditional therapies as a resource in the quest for new treatments for disease.
The RMIT Chinese Medicine Research Group was formally established in 2001 in RMIT University’s Faculty of Life Sciences. Currently, the Group has 13 postgraduate (masters and doctoral) students and six full-time researchers/supervisors. Its main areas of research are randomized, controlled clinical trials of acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapies for the treatment of seasonal allergic rhinitis, perennial allergic rhinitis, tension type headache, small cell lung cancer and chronic pain. It also performs research on quality control of herbal medicine and on the mechanisms of the pharmacological actions of Chinese herbal formulae, as well as socio-economic research relevant to Chinese medicine practice. The RMIT Chinese Medicine Research Group has received funding support from RMIT University, herbal pharmaceutical companies in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Taiwan and from other areas of industry, as well as grants from national competitive research funding agencies.

To promote research and evidence-based practice in Chinese medicine, RMIT Chinese Medicine has organized and hosted a number of national and international events, including scientific symposia, expert lectures, and a major international congress. In November 2003, RMIT University, in collaboration with Nanjing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine hosted the First World Congress of Chinese Medicine, in Melbourne. The Congress, which highlighted the most recent developments in Chinese medicine education, clinical practice research and regulation, attracted some 800 attendees from 23 countries.

Chinese Medicine Regulation

In the interests of public safety, Australian governments have recently undertaken reviews of Chinese medicine practice in various Australian states. A comprehensive review conducted jointly by the State Governments of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, between 1995 and 1996, resulted in series of recommendations for Chinese medicine practice, the most significant of which led to the State of Victoria becoming the first state outside China to introduce statutory regulations for Chinese medicine practice.

Throughout Australia, up until proclamation of the Victorian Chinese Medicine Registration Act, Chinese medicine practitioners were largely self-regulated through various professional bodies. There are a number of Chinese medicine professional associations, both state-based and national. These bodies have made significant contributions to the development of Chinese medicine in Australia and continue to be involved in self-regulation of the profession. However, in the State of Victoria, the Chinese medicine profession is now regulated in the same way as other healthcare professions, including western medicine. The Chinese Medicine Registration Board of Victoria, established under the provisions of the Chinese Medicine Registration Act (2000), is responsible for the registration of Chinese medicine practitioners and herbal dispensers. The Board sets standards for practitioner training and accredits training programs that meet its standards. The Registration Board is also responsible for the scheduling of herbal medicines to ensure their appropriate use, for setting guidelines for procedures such as those for infection control, and for dealing with complaints relating to safe and ethical Chinese medicine practice. Since it was established in 2000, the Board has received almost 900 applications for registration, of which some 650 registrations have been approved. Further information is available at www.cmrb.vic.gov.au
At a Federal level, the Office of Complementary Medicine has been established within the national drug regulatory body, the Therapeutic Goods Administration, to provide for the regulation of all manufactured complementary medicines, including manufactured Chinese medicine formulae, in respect of quality, safety and efficacy (www.tga.gov.au/cm/cm.htm).

Conclusion

It is evident that there has been a dramatic increase in the popularity of Chinese medicine services with the Australian public. This has been recognized and responded to by governments and educational institutions in ways that are intended to enhance public safety and confidence in Chinese medicine. The major challenges facing the profession in Australia, as in other countries where there have been a similar increase in demand, is to move as quickly as possible to develop an underpinning evidence base for Chinese medicine therapies and to promote understanding on the part of practitioners of both western and Chinese medicine of each others’ traditions, principles and practices, that is, to harmonize delivery of medical services, with patient outcomes being the primary consideration.

About the Authors

Associate Professor Charlie Changli Xue, BMed, PhD, is Head of RMIT Chinese Medicine and also Director of the RMIT Chinese Medicine Research Group at RMIT University. Since 2002, he has frequently served as a World Health Organization (WHO) Short-Term Consultant in Traditional Medicine. Professor Xue is a member of the Chinese Medicine Registration Board of the State of Victoria in Australia and an Honorary Academic Advisor to the Institute of Chinese Medicine of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is also a member of the International Advisory Committee to the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, China. Recently, Professor Xue was appointed as an inaugural member of the Board of Directors for the Australian Research Centre for Complementary & Alternative Medicines. Professor Xue holds a medical degree with a major in Chinese Medicine from China and a PhD from RMIT University.

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Professor David Story, BSc, PhD, Grad. Cert. Management, holds the appointment of Innovation Professor at RMIT University. After 30 years experience in research, education and academic management, initially at the University of Melbourne and, since 1993, at RMIT University, in 2002 Professor Story was also awarded the title Professor Emeritus by RMIT University. Professor Story’s areas of research are cardiovascular and neuropharmacology. He is author/co-author of more than 200 scientific articles and has supervised the candidature of 17 PhD students. He has held a number of senior positions at Australian universities, including eight years as Dean of RMIT University’s Faculty of Life Sciences. Since 1997, Professor Story has been a member of the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration’s Medicine’s Evaluation Committee. He was a member of the Steering Committee that established Biocomm Pty Ltd, an initiative of the Victorian State Government to facilitate the commercialization of medical biotechnology research discoveries. He served for many years on the Council of the Australasian Society for Clinical and Experimental Pharmacologists and Toxicologists, including a term as President.

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