Situation of Chinese Medicine in China

by Professor Leung Ping Chung

Chinese Medicine is a cultural achievement. The tradition has an unusually long history and a strong philosophical basis. The traditional practice has served the people of China for thousands of years, not only within mainland China, but also in Chinese communities outside China. With increasing disillusionment about the effectiveness of modern Western medicine, which commands a reductionist approach based on a single target concept, alternative medicine based on past experience has enjoyed a corresponding increase in positive attention. This apparently unusual development happened because Western medicine – in spite of its successes – has yet to solve all the difficult problems in clinical practice.
On the other hand, the practice of Chinese Medicine in China has faced vehement criticism amongst some eminent scientists within China since 2006. Fellows of the Chinese Academy of Science made several observations about the cost-effectiveness of research in Chinese Medicine, and developed a negative view and criticized Traditional Chinese Medicine as “False Science”. Debate on this critical observation became bitter, and political leaders took decisive steps to stop the debate and organized proactive activities to support and further perpetuate the practice of Chinese Medicine.

The Institute of Chinese Medicine of the Chinese University of Hong Kong was concerned with the recent development in China, and considered it necessary to critically assess the situation of Chinese Medicine in China. A large scale survey was therefore organized to achieve this goal. The survey started in April 2008 and was completed before winter of 2008. It took a comprehensive approach by covering education, service, research and production. First-hand information was obtained through interviews, discussions, workshops and a conference.

A summary about the survey will be given here. A thorough understanding about the direction of development of Chinese Medicine in China, is critical for all scientists and clinicians, seriously involved in the research of this field.

**Chinese Medicine Education**

Since late 1950’s China started proper degree courses in Chinese Medicine which are delivered in Universities. The ratio of Modern Medical to Chinese Medicine Courses has remained about 5 to 1. The contents of the courses include modern medical sciences and Chinese Medicine. After half a century of practice however, problems arising from the degree education have become obvious. The problems include the following:

- Receiving second grade subsidy from Central Government
- Course content shifting to increased emphasis on modern Western medical sciences
- Course length too short to allow a good balance between the two different systems of medicine
- Chinese Medicine Hospitals are losing their true nature as in-patients are receiving mostly modern Western clinical treatment.

**Chinese Medicine Services**

Chinese Medicine services have remained popular. Still, frustrations are mounting because modern in-hospital treatments are demanded by patients and young Chinese Medicine practitioners therefore take pride in shifting more and more to Western medicine.

Services within the out-patient clinics remain purely traditional and specially popular areas include acupuncture, rehabilitation and areas where modern medicine has failed to provide satisfactory solutions. It appears that patients are aware of the strengths of Chinese Medicine and the special areas where Chinese Medicine can provide standard and unusual offers. Yet, there has been no official or professional recognition and promotion of these special areas.

Chinese Medicine has served its patients well in the past. With the
rapid development of medical sciences, understanding of the etiology and causes of diseases, provision of more and more sophisticated tools for investigation, and availability of pharmaceutical and interventional means of healing, there should be an appropriate, timely analysis of the special indications for traditional Chinese medicine. A proper division of labor appears appropriate.

**Chinese Medicine Research**

Research in traditional Chinese Medicine in the old days refers to critical analyses of clinical cases, observation on the quality of botanical products, and efforts on the modern explanation of old classics of clinical practice. In terms of modern medical practice, case reports, observations, and academic studies are insufficient to qualify for efficacy authentication.

Research on Chinese Medicine in the past years has improved significantly and can be observed in Chinese language publications. However, critical analysis of the publications has shown that the studies tend to be partial: either confined to product quality, laboratory observations or simple clinical effects of certain marketed products.

Research in Chinese Medicine needs to involve proper clinical evaluations, understanding the mechanistic effects in the laboratory and developing a proper quality control mechanism, from the botanical to the chemical profiles.

**Botanical Products**

China is a huge market available for the circulation of botanical products. Given the long traditional use of botanical products, a new product has little difficulty gaining favorable markets. Research on the efficacy of new products using cumbersome international standards, therefore, appears unnecessary. Active promotion and advertising have replaced the need for research.

When botanical products enjoy such a leeway in market development, old products from respectable firms enjoy continuous support, while new products could achieve breakthroughs via active and expensive advertising. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect a rapid change in the market development of botanicals, when the status-quo appears to profit almost everyone. The reality, however, is not favorable for the proper development of health-related botanical products.

Scientists in China have also adopted a pharmaceutical direction in the production of botanical health products. Sooner or later they might shift their emphasis to biologically active fractionation, instead of insisting on getting the essential chemistry.

**Future Directions**

With the development of Systems Biology, it becomes more obvious that what we already know as causes of diseases is insufficient. Pathologies leading to disease are more complicated than expected. The opportunity for the development of Chinese Medicine, which adopts an approach of prevention, coupled with an active promotion of physiological balance, has now ripened substantially.

Chinese Medicine has two major categories: the philosophical and the scientific components. The philosophical component is concerned with
the conceptual explanation and offer of solutions to health and disease, while the scientific component involves application of the treatment solutions. Philosophical concepts could look for modern applications in modern Western clinical practices. Traditional Chinese Medicine treatment protocols require standard and innovative scientific research procedures to prove clinical efficacy; biological, physiological and pharmacological effects; and careful, comprehensive evaluations on the product safety and authenticity.

About the Author

Professor Leung Ping Chung, OBE, JP, Hon DSSc, DSC, MBBS, MS, FRACS, FRCS(Edin), FHKCOS, FHKAM(Orth); is Professor of Orthopaedics & Traumatology, Faculty of Medicine; Director of Centre for Clinical Trials on Chinese Medicine; and Chairman of the Management Committee of the Institute of Chinese Medicine, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

His research areas include orthopaedics, osteoporosis, microsurgery health, Traditional Chinese Medicine and general education. He is also the author of over 300 scientific manuscripts in journals and 17 books. In addition, Prof Leung has also been appointed as editor of 5 International Journals since 1982 and awarded many honors, including the Far Eastern Economic Review – Asian Innovation Silver Award (2000), Order of the British Empire (1995) and Liston Victoria Jubilee Prize by Royal College of Surgeons (1990).

In his capacity of the Chairman of the Management Committee of the Institute of Chinese Medicine, Prof Leung has put enormous efforts into modernizing traditional Chinese medicine. He is the Co-Convener of the Clinical Trials Section and has adopted the Efficacy Driven Approach in Clinical Trials. Notable collaborations include a NIH international centre project with the participation of Harvard University, Keio University (Japan), Beijing University and Chinese University of Hong Kong.