



Sense about (ancient) science

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If, like me, you occasionally stumble across one of those quackbuster diatribes in the media or on the internet, you may perhaps have noticed a certain amount of misinformation and medico-scientific bigotry.

Like you, I have asked myself 'why the hell don't we DO something?'. The lazy response is to demand that others be more proactive in fighting back when, in many ways, the responsibility to properly explain what we do might also be embodied through our profession as whole. With this ideal in mind, in the next few issues of *The Acupuncturist* I offer some personal thoughts on the ways that we can all do our bit to counter ill-informed prejudice by learning to present a more accurate picture of our profession, its history, doctrines, efficacy and practices.

Critics tell us that what we do is based on oriental metaphysical nonsense theories and that Chinese medicine (CM) offers us no rational concept of disease and pathology. In this view modern biomedicine is much more 'real' because it offers detailed descriptions of disease. Although untrue in many ways, our responses rarely appear robust or connected to a proper understanding of the tradition.

Sometimes holistic doctrines derived from 20th century naturopathic ideals from the west are projected onto acupuncture, such as 'we don't treat diseases ...'. This misrepresents the oriental medical tradition. We often fail to properly recognise that the study of symptoms, pathology and disease has been an integral part of CM for most of its history. Firmly-held beliefs about what we do are not always congruent with the actual oriental tradition.

As well as devising the qi-based explanatory models of health and disease that form one pillar of our practice, Chinese physicians also conducted meticulous investigations

into the material nature of disease. Many of these stand up very well to modern biomedical scrutiny, despite the fact that many were written 1,500+ years ago. If we ignore these we are under-informed. Here I offer a few examples of the study of diseases taken from my forthcoming book *Chinese Medicine – Roots of Modern Practice*.

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Ge Hong's *Zhouhou Beijifang* (+326) discusses many diseases including smallpox, about which he says: 'the lesions look like burns covered with a white starchy material and whose surface reforms as soon as it is broken. If not treated immediately most of those affected will die, those who do survive will be left with residual purple-black scars.'

Later, Qian Yi (1023-1108) published a more detailed account that meticulously differentiated the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of chicken pox, measles, scarlet fever and smallpox. Similar stories can be traced for most illnesses.

In the 6th century Chao Yuanfang was responsible for compiling a detailed textbook on disease pathology. His monumental 52-volume *Zhubing Yuanhou Lun* (On the Causes and Symptoms of Illness) gave detailed and generally accurate descriptions of 1,732 diseases. On diabetes he writes: 'the disease called xiao ke involves unremitting thirst with polyuria ... those suffering this disease tend to

develop carbuncles and gangrene.... This is a disease with sweet urine that often begins to develop in those who become obese having overindulged in sweet and rich food.'

Written 1,400 years ago this description, like so many others in this work, could safely be copied into a modern biomedical textbook. Sun Simiao, at around the same time, was advocating the use of pig pancreas as a treatment for diabetes as well as the use of seaweed for iodine deficiency goitre. A few centuries after its publication, Chao's book was translated into Arabic and became part of Avicenna's medical works which spread to the west in

mediaeval times, contributing to the founding of the European study of pathology. To

some extent modern pathology is rooted in the work of China's ancient physicians.

We should take every opportunity to challenge the assertion that Chinese medicine lacks any basis in medical fact and the rational study of pathology. China has a long tradition of careful and scholarly study of disease and pathology that partners our theoretical explanations, the basis of which I will briefly discuss in upcoming issues of *The Acupuncturist*.

Next time my theme will be 'is everything we find in the oriental health traditions a precious immutable truth or is it time to do some critical reflection?'