Traditional Chinese Medicine: Good Enough?

By ACSH Staff — May 21, 2002

Recently, Xiaorui Zhang, World Health Organization (WHO) coordinator on traditional medicine policy, noted the difficulty in conducting clinical trials of herbal remedies because of two factors: first, participants can detect a difference in taste between the placebo and the herbal therapy; second, quality control is difficult since many of the herbal products contain multiple ingredients, making it tough to determine which chemicals are responsible for any health outcomes. She added: "Western medicine came to China about a hundred years ago. That Chinese people survived for thousands of years without Western medicine shows that it [Chinese medicine] works." With a nearly five thousand year-old recorded history, China is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. However, can we so easily attribute its survival to its medical traditions?

Is its survival reason enough to discontinue clinical trials of herbal remedies?

First and foremost, we need to put into context Zhang’s usage of the word “survived.” If she means simply to imply that Chinese society continued to function, then yes, it has survived for over four thousand years. However, if instead of mere survival we look at longevity, the statistics are not as impressive. In the first part of this century, before Western medicine became prevalent in China, the average life span was just twenty-five years, with large numbers dying from infectious diseases. Traditional Chinese medicine did little to prevent these deaths.

Today, the Chinese are no longer dying of communicable diseases. Rather, more than half will die of modern diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke, a significant proportion of which can be attributed to the increased incidence of cigarette smoking. The British Medical Journal reported back in 1998 that one-third of all young Chinese men would be killed by tobacco if current smoking patterns continue, and currently smoking kills nearly two thousand people every day in China, increasing to eight thousand by 2050. However, even with the negative health effects caused by the introduction of tobacco, Chinese life expectancy has dramatically increased. One way we can look at how life expectancy has risen, while controlling for smoking, is to look at the life expectancy rates of women. (Surprisingly, smoking rates for women have decreased in the last half-century in China in 1950, 10% of young women became smokers, but today, only 1% do.)
As mentioned earlier, in 1900 (when Western medicine was just beginning to infiltrate China's borders), the average Chinese woman lived to age 25, while in the United States a nation dominated by allopathic or conventional medicine the average woman lived to be 48 years old. By 1949, the average woman's life span in China was 35 years (71 years for American women) and as of 2000, it was 73 years (and around 80 years for American women). Is this nearly 50-year increase in average life expectancy thanks to Ma Huang and acupuncture? On the contrary, it can be attributed to greater access to and the better quality of Western medical care. In 1949, China had 80,000 beds and over 360,000 medical personnel. Today, it has 3.18 million beds and nearly 4.5 million medical personnel available to treat its roughly 1.3 billion population.

We can also take a look at another region that has a strong tradition of folk medicine and see how it is "surviving." The practice of folk medicine is actually more prevalent on the African continent, where it tends to be the only alternative. For example, in Mozambique, where 1.2 million people have HIV and 290,000 have AIDS, 80% of the people use traditional medical practices. Do Mozambique’s life expectancy rates reflect the "success" of their traditional medicine? No. It is estimated that the average woman in 2001 will only live to 35 years old, while the average man will live to 37 years old. Traditional medicine is doing little to help the people of this country, where increased access and improved Western medical care could greatly increase their chances of survival to a riper, older age.

It is possible for Western medicine and traditional Chinese to coexist, as is the case in China, where 95% of hospitals have folk medicine wards, with 340,000 doctors and 100,000 beds dedicated to traditional medicine. However, it is wrong to attribute the survival of the Chinese civilization to its traditional medical practices. There are many factors that contribute to a civilization's success or for that matter, collapse war, drought, disease, political struggles but even through the haze of complex data, the statistics show us how Western medicine has greatly benefited the health and well-being of the Chinese population. Eighty percent of all Chinese who have ever lived, lived all or a fraction of their lives in this past century when allopathic medicine was introduced and institutionalized. Western medicine is why life expectancy is increasing around the globe and also largely accounts for China's massive population.

So, should we give up on conducting clinical trials of herbal remedies, citing the Chinese civilization's "survival" as proof enough that it works? Zhang was also quoted as saying: "Only through regulation can we ensure quality, safety, and efficacy." Traditional medicine has something to offer in that it treats the emotional and spiritual needs of people, but how do we know for certain that these herbal remedies didn't actually contribute to the short life spans at the turn of the century? With current reports of death, heart attacks, and strokes associated with herbal remedy use (such as Ma Huang or ephedra), we need not just regulation but clinical trials to prove that it's worth the potential health risk. And we should give credit where credit it's due and thank Western medicine for increasing life expectancy by nearly fifty years.

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Correct me if I'm wrong, but the 5/21 article on Chinese medicine seems to be confusing the effects of public health measures (and increasing wealth), such as clean water, sanitation, and plenty of food, with what most people think of as "Western medicine."