

The Importance of Research

We can trace the roots of Oriental medicine back thousands of years. Historians can look back to the *Huang Di Neijing (The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic)* more than 2,300 years ago and find that the Chinese performed autopsies to determine the cause of death. This may not be the first type of research related to the practice of Oriental medicine, but it would be a very good place to start.

Why did the Chinese perform these procedures? To demonstrate, on a consistent basis, what happens to the human body and why.

Today, the key to any health profession is how it performs in clinical practice. The true test of a profession's credibility and growth is the ability of a clinician to get consistent results (what happens and why) in the treatment of patients.

How does a clinician achieve consistent, predictable and reliable results in treatment after treatment, patient after patient? The answer is research. All professions grow, change, build credibility and improve based on the research they conduct and produce.

Millions of Oriental medicine treatments have been delivered. Patients have benefited and moved to new levels of health and wellness. Today, we are experiencing a meeting of Eastern and Western forms of care. Western medicine, with its voluminous masses of empirical data, is now looking to Eastern medicine, which has produced remarkable results in a large percentage of patients. The question is, can these results be reproduced reliably and consistently?

Oriental medicine is in a stage of growth and development in which a research paradigm must be established and properly conducted. Credible studies must be undertaken, and their results must be verified to validate the physiological aspects of Oriental medicine.

A number of questions come to mind when asking about research:

1. What type of research is going to be conducted?
2. Where will it be conducted?
3. How will the results of the research impact our profession?
4. Who's going to pay for it?

In Western medicine, the gold standard for determining the effectiveness of a product or technique remains the randomized controlled trial (RCT). While the validity of the RCT has come under fire recently, it's still one of the biggest factors that insurance providers, health plans and managed care groups use to determine whether they'll provide coverage. If we want to be included in these groups' plans, we'll need to start publishing large-scale, *bona fide* research, and the RCT may be the best place to start.

Many of today's studies are conducted at universities and other institutions. We already have a good

foundation, with more than fourdozen acupuncture colleges in the U.S. and dozens more overseas -- not to mention the Society for Acupuncture Research in Maryland. Many of these schools already have small, but growing, research departments. With the advent of the Internet and other forms of communication, there's no reason they can't work together to produce a large, multi-site study.

Research helps build the respect and credibility our profession needs to achieve national licensing. Increased research improves our chances of achieving licensing in all 50 states, based on standards of competency that will be due -- at least in part -- to research. Positive research backed by large, controlled studies can also play a role in the profession's getting state and national legislation passed that would be favorable to Oriental medicine practitioners and their patients.

Research findings also help protect the public; they can begin to understand what acupuncture is, how it works, and what it can do for them.

If everyone benefits from research, it only seems fair that everyone should contribute. Support comes in many forms. The most obvious is financial, but there are other ways of helping further Oriental medicine. In other professions, alumni associations help support ongoing research. Research grants are slowly beginning to surface around the country. More schools are looking toward conducting research or opening research departments.

Still, much more work needs to be done.

Recently, an acupuncturist was sitting in front of a hospital credentialing committee composed of seven medical doctors. When they asked the acupuncturist what happened to a neuron when an acupuncture needle was inserted, the acupuncturist froze: he wasn't able to explain the effects to the doctors in a way that made sense to them scientifically.

Research will help the profession bridge that gap in communication. It will not only support and explain procedures, it will lead to better treatment and functional outcomes. For new patients "sitting on the fence," it will give them reason to give acupuncture and Oriental medicine a try. For those who already believe in acupuncture, it will help persuade them to refer more of their friends for care. And for providers of Oriental medicine, research will prove to the world that what they do has scientific merit, and it will help them experience the rewards they rightly deserve.

SEPTEMBER 2000