

Nuherbs Co Scholarship Program

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“How will you help to set traditional Chinese herbal medicine apart from the rest and make it a household remedy?”

Probiotics, prebiotics, Co Q-10, Magnesium, St. John’s Wort. Supplements are big business, and not without reason. In order to assess how best to bring Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) herbs into the mainstream along with natural health products, it is important to clarify first what makes natural home remedies so popular in the first place. The popularity of natural health products is due in part to ease of availability (i.e., over-the-counter with no prescription necessary), effectiveness, and, with some, clever marketing. However, I believe the success of natural health products is also in response to the growing decline in trust in Western medicine.

Let us take a quick review of how Western medicine came to be so trusted. The 19th century was a boon for Western medicine. Anesthesia, antiseptic surgical procedures, and pasteurization addressed critical needs of the time and heightened our awareness of Western medicine. With the 20th century, eradication of smallpox and polio lent even greater credibility to Western medicine. It seemed the more we put under the microscope, the more we could treat and cure, and Western medicine became the default route in treating disease. But as with everything, there are limits. Western medicine in the late 20th century to date continues to get more granular with what goes under the microscope. It has been criticized for treating the disease, not the person. Medications that treat one symptom give rise to unwanted side effects, the list of which are often as undesirable as the original disease. Then, too, why does the medication only treat symptoms?

People seeking alternatives have turned to home remedies not only in an effort to ease off of long-term medication use, but because they want to treat the underlying disease. However, supplements are not without their limitations, too. Importantly, because supplements are so readily available, people have the tendency to self-diagnose. Further, pre-packaged supplements cater to the masses. Even if one accurately self-diagnoses, then, what works for one may not work for another.

The very limitations that Western medicine and home remedies have are in fact the strengths that TCM herbs have; namely, differential diagnosis and the ability to treat the underlying disease. **It is these two strengths that set TCM herbs apart from all other forms of medication.**

You Gu Wu Yun, roughly translated, means ‘having cause, no harm.’ There is an important reason that TCM herb sales are largely off-limits to the masses. It is because they should be. Practitioners spend a lifetime building an experiential rolodex of differential diagnosis. In assessing the whole person, a TCM practitioner understands, for example, that no one home remedy is a panacea for all headaches due to any etiology. It’s just not that simple.

I believe then, that TCM herbs can become a household remedy, but it will take time. There are two things that must happen.

The first is already underway, albeit in the early stages. There is a slow bridge forming between Western and Eastern medicine practitioners. Both realize that the other has strengths to offer. Oncologists treating cancer patients, for example, understand that TCM is effective in pain management, but may not understand that TCM herbs are very effective in nourishing the blood and treating yin deficiency. These concepts do not exist in Western medicine, and therefore are difficult to translate in medical jargon that a Western practitioner can both internalize and advertise to cancer patients. Consequently, there is a big advertising “gap” in what TCM herbs can offer from Western doctors who patients inherently trust. This infrastructure between Western and Eastern medicine must be strengthened. There are ways to effect this change. One is for U.S. medical schools to offer introductory TCM classes, or, to take it a step further, to integrate the Western and MAOM/DAOM degrees. At the college I attend, there are both Western doctors and nurses seeking degrees. Why not capitalize on this interest?

Alternatively, Western and Eastern doctors can “team up” for one-stop shopping. This is already happening on a limited basis, especially in states where law mandates a doctor referral to a TCM practitioner, or in states where a TCM practitioner must practice under the supervision of a Western doctor, but this needs to become more commonplace in all states and on a voluntary basis on both parties. The message to patients becomes two-fold: (1) there is a level of shared trust between the practitioners, and (2) that there are broader options available in the treatment of diseases.

Second, TCM herbs as a “home remedy” is a misnomer. To the extent that TCM herbs are prescribed via thoughtful differential diagnosis with the intent of treating the underlying cause, we should never seek to put these herbs on the same shelf as OTC supplements at the pharmacy. These herbs *should be* thought of as boutique herbs specifically tailored to the needs of each patient that walks through the door and presents with unique syndromes.

What needs to happen, then, is for these herbs to become one of the first medications people turn to, as opposed to what they usually are, which is as a last resort when no other medication has worked. This, along with the East-West bridge, will again take time. Western medicine is all too ready to advertise on billboards, mainstream magazines, television, and ads in popular medical websites and blogs. There is a dearth of similar advertising for TCM herbs. While the advertising outlets may be different for Eastern medication, some advertising should exist outside of TCM trade journals and websites. Practitioners can look to advertise in other complementary and alternative forms of medicine, such as yoga and meditation journals, websites, and magazines.

Once people understand that TCM herbs can effectively treat the whole person and not just the symptoms, and that differential diagnosis is necessary to ensure proper treatment, TCM herbs will become a go-to home remedy.