

Pill boxes. Broken hips. Diminishing memory. These are just a few of the things that come to mind when Americans envision growing old. I have witnessed this fear come to life with my grandmother. She wakes up every morning and is given a pill to swallow before she can even get out of bed. This pill is supposed to prepare her stomach for digestion. She struggles to get out of bed because of the pain in her legs due to multiple hip injuries. After she finally gets out and eats breakfast, she is given another 8 pharmaceutical pills to swallow. One to lower her high blood pressure. One for her diabetes. One for the pain. One to relieve the constipation caused by the pain medication and so on. After all this, one final pill for the depression that has inevitably set in.

What if growing old didn't have to be this way? Many people believe that once they get old, it's too late to reverse the damage their bodies have endured throughout a lifetime. While the body of an eighty-five-year old may indeed be less resilient than that of a twenty-year old, the elder body and mind are still far more receptive to non-drug-based changes than we might give them credit for.

Ideally, as a Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioner, I would inspire my elderly patients to completely change their lifestyle- eat a proper diet for their constitution, do some gentle exercise daily, schedule regular massages, and keep their minds active. However, getting people to change their lifestyle is perhaps the most challenging task for any medical practitioner. Americans are programmed to essentially put their health in other people's hands. Instead of taking accountability for their own life choices, they often choose easier solutions, such as popping pills or undergoing surgery. It may be a lot less work for the individual, but the return is not nearly as great. Once old age has set in, a lifetime of these patterns has been established, and it becomes very difficult to change them.

We, as Chinese Medicine practitioners are unable to ignore the benefit of lifestyle changes. But when faced with some of these elderly patients, we need to ask ourselves what is the most efficient method of treatment? For this, I believe that Chinese herbs have a great deal to offer.

The elderly population is rapidly becoming dependent on multiple medications and the expense is growing out of control. Often, one or more of these medications are taken to counteract some of the side effects of another one. Some of these medications may be crucial to the patient's health. Western medicine has made many advances in medicine that can undoubtedly prolong life, and some of these are irreplaceable by Chinese herbs. However, in the case of many diseases, the herbal approach is extremely effective and, arguably superior to the western approach.

Where Western medical practitioners fall short, by and large, is in their failure to view each individual patient as a whole being; mind, body, and spirit.

Let's take a disease like "depression" for instance. If 10 patients walk into a Western medical facility, the doctor will prescribe each of them one of the top 4-5 antidepressants produced by pharmaceutical companies in this country, regardless of their unique

individual circumstances. There will likely be side effects to the medication, in which case the patient will have to weigh the benefits with the costs and decide if it is worth the tradeoff. If the patient is already on other medications, he or she will also have to make sure there are no negative drug interactions.

In contrast, if 10 people seek Traditional Chinese Medicine consultation for their depression, more than likely, 10 unique patterns and diagnoses will be concluded. Each of those diagnoses takes into account all the other signs and symptoms the patient is experiencing and each requires a unique treatment. Patients don't have to make those same tradeoffs.

So what if we could eliminate some of these pills that the elderly take daily? Maybe we could get them off their pain medication and treat them with acupuncture and herbs. Maybe we could take away one of those antidepressants. We even have hope at treating some of the "lifestyle" diseases, such as high blood pressure, if they haven't progressed too out of control yet. What if we could work closely with Western doctors to decide which medications are crucial and which ones can be substituted with Chinese herbs?

I believe that reducing the number of medications taken daily would both improve the health and morale of elderly patients. While there certainly is a role for modern day pharmaceuticals to play in today's healthcare, I believe it should be reserved for emergencies and more critical, late-stage diseases. Many medications have not been around for very long and much research is still needed to fully understand the effects they have on the body, especially when multiple medications are combined. Chinese herbs, on the other hand, have been used and studied for thousands of years, and typically are gentler, working in harmony with the body.

Medicare would be a great avenue to set forth upon these efforts. If the Traditional Chinese Medicine community can begin to pool resources and build a case to Medicare for why they should cover the use of Chinese herbs in their program, it would be a gigantic first step. Economically speaking, it would make sense because it would save the program millions of dollars it spends on prescription drugs each year. As I see it right now, the main barrier is proving that Chinese herbs are effective. This is where the growing research studies on Chinese medicine will hopefully prove helpful.

Senior citizen homes would be another great place to create an impact. If TCM practitioners could be included as part of the healthcare staff, this would give an opportunity for practitioners to gradually build relationships and gain trust from the elderly patients.

The transition away from the "pill" mentality might be a slow one, but we have to start somewhere. If we start to make concerted efforts today, my hope is that future generations will begin to see a more hopeful, positive picture of "growing old."