Multicultural health

Eastern medical practices augment Western techniques

Interviewed by Chelan David

Many people seeking respite from chronic pain have discovered the healing powers of Eastern medicine. Complementary procedures, used in conjunction with Western techniques, can help patients find relief. Treatments include acupuncture, therapeutic massage, tai chi exercises, herbal medicine and alterations to medication intake.

Dr. Ka-Kit Hui, director of the UCLA Center for East-West Medicine, believes that integrating traditional Chinese medicine alongside modern Western medicine can help to improve the health care system.

“The low-tech, low-cost, high-touch, self-help model will hopefully allow us to provide solutions to some of the problems we have in terms of our health care system,” he says.

Smart Business spoke with Hui about the differences between Eastern medicine and Western medicine, why complementary medicine has become so popular and how businesses can benefit from this approach.

What are the differences between the practices of Eastern medicine and Western medicine?

In Western medicine, we use the reductionist approach to try and locate where the organs, cells and molecules are in trouble. In general, other approaches look at the whole system; it’s more holistic. It’s more hands-on, more qualitative, and it focuses more on body, mind and spirit.

People who use these methods tend to be health-conscious, or they are desperate because Western medicine hasn’t been able to help them and they’re searching for ways to complement what Western medicine cannot do.

How have you integrated the theories and practices of Eastern and Western medicine to achieve positive results in patient care?

The two systems are complementary. The Chinese approach looks at the macro aspect, and Western medicine looks at the details. Oftentimes, we are only successful in Western medicine to zero in on the certain things that we can actually do.

But other times, we don’t know why (patients are) not well. And that’s where Eastern medicine comes into play.

It works without knowing all the details. It works by rebalancing the system and re-establishing the flow by using the body’s own mechanisms.

In a sense, we use Western medicine to make sure that we are not missing anything, particularly life-threatening problems. But there’s a role for both.

It’s like a flip shade pair of glasses. Each lens looks at the system very differently. By using Western medicine to look at the trees, branches and roots, and by using Chinese medicine to look at the forest, we have a much more comprehensive view.

What challenges did you face in getting funding when you founded the Center for East-West Medicine?

At first I didn’t have any funding. In 1993, people thought this was all quackery. It was very tough. I actually donated my own money.

When I saw patients and gave talks, anything in excess of what I got paid, I would chip in to help build the program. I believed it would be very helpful for patients and for society in general.

Why has complementary medicine been so widely embraced?

Everyone wants to stay well and seek solutions to problems where Western medicine has not been successful. Also, the worldview that complementary medicine focuses on resonates with a lot of people. They want more time with practitioners, they want doctors to be more hands-on and look at them as a person, and they like natural healing.

Very few people are rejecting the use of Western medicine; they use it in combination. Patients really like doctors to be able to provide a comprehensive approach, and we aim to provide an integrated model.

How can businesses benefit from this approach to medicine?

A lot of people have health problems related to their lifestyles. When they are stressed, they do things that are unhealthy, like eat too much, smoke, drink and use medication.

When you have pain and you just take pain pills, you’re masking the problem. It’s important to pay attention to how much pain is going on — back pain, headaches and overuse of people’s arms on their computers. We think of health problems like heart disease as separate, but it’s all related.

We need to look at the social environment, the natural environment, look at people’s lifestyles and then create an overall plan to see how to improve the whole system.

I believe that if this approach is done right, we can have a much more productive work force.

Also, it will handle some of the high costs of health care that we are experiencing — 14 (percent) to 15 percent of our GDP, or $1.6 trillion. If we, as a society, redistribute the way that we spend our health care dollars, we will have a much better health care system and a much better society.

DR. KA-KIT HUI is director of the UCLA Center for East-West Medicine. For more information on the Center, visit www.cewm.med.ucla.edu.