

## Traditional Chinese medicine becoming another health care option for Canadians

Patricia Houlihan

**Résumé :** Les médecins canadiens devront peut-être affronter une concurrence plus vive des praticiens qui ont recours à des méthodes douces dans le domaine des soins de santé. Par exemple, la médecine traditionnelle chinoise semble de plus en plus populaire. Certains médecins se méfient de cette pratique, mais d'autres orientent leurs patients vers ce type de traitement, fondé sur des approches moins effractives que la médecine occidentale.

In this era of consumer awareness, in which patients are searching for alternative and often less invasive approaches to health care, Canadian physicians should be aware of what might become a new form of competition: traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). This type of treatment is now being taught in the US; a spokesman for the Toronto-based Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture Association of Canada said there are more than 100 TCM practitioners in Canada.

Pamela Speraw of Halifax is one of them. There are no dark shadows in her treatment room, no beaded curtains, no flowing robes, no burning incense, no herbs. It

looks much like the room in which a patient might confer with a family doctor. A 38-year-old native of the US Midwest who has no Asian family roots, Speraw bases her practice on treatments that include acupuncture, herbal treatment, diet modification, heat therapy and therapeutic massage.

A deep and long-standing philosophic difference separates Eastern and Western medicine. The 20th-century Western philosophy of science and, in turn, medical science, is based largely on the work of René Descartes, whose analytic approach to reasoning in the 17th century led to the belief that humans are quite separate from nature. This "Cartesian" mind-body separation was never embraced in the East, where the human body and mind, and their environment, are approached as a unified whole.

Speraw, who holds a bachelor's degree in psychology, considered studying nutrition at the graduate level but never thought about med-

ical school. "My interest was always in health and wellness rather than illness and disease," she says.

This interest, plus a personal experience with Chinese medicine — she was treated for what had been diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis — led her to the Emperor's College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Santa Monica, Calif., where she and more than 150 classmates studied full time for 3 years.

She characterizes the educational approach as "very much like a conventional college class," with lectures, cadaveric dissection, laboratory experience and 800 to 900 hours of clinical patient contact. Her classmates included nurses, nutritionists, naturopaths, massage therapists and several Iranian doctors.

Now established in Halifax, Speraw says she sees many patients who have diagnosed medical disorders. "The most common things I see are arthritis, gastrointestinal disorders, female problems such as dysmenorrhea, amenorrhea, unex-

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Patricia Houlihan is a freelance writer living in Halifax, NS.

plained infertility, endometriosis and severe PMS [premenstrual syndrome], and migraine headaches." She also sees "quite a lot" of patients who have allergies, completing a litany of chronic illnesses that Western medicine has difficulty treating. Many of these patients have run the gamut of what Canadian medicine has to offer and feel they do not really have an alternative. Some have arrived in Speraw's office after psychiatric care provided no improvement in their condition.

Although medical acupuncture is well established in Canada, the

practice of traditional Chinese medicine is currently unlicensed and unregulated in Nova Scotia and most other provinces. Accordingly, the provincial medicare plan does not cover Speraw's fees, although some private insurance companies do. Currently, she charges \$55 for the first consultation, which usually lasts up to 90 minutes, and \$40 a session thereafter; she sees about 6 patients per day. In response to the lack of regulation, a group of trained acupuncturists in Nova Scotia has formed the Nova Scotia Acupuncture Association. Other provinces

have similar organizations.

While word of mouth attracts most of Speraw's patients, several Halifax physicians have sent patients to her. One Halifax family physician, who would only discuss his involvement if he remained anonymous, said the patients he refers often have nowhere else to turn. However, he may suggest such treatment to patients who prefer to have all options presented, or who cannot tolerate drug treatment. "People with a lot of allergies and sensitivities may do better with herbs and diet," he says. After 3 years of referring patients to Speraw and practitioners like her, he is pleased with the results he has seen in most patients. But like any other form of therapy, he warns, nothing works for everyone all the time.

Why was the doctor concerned about being identified to colleagues as a supporter of alternative types of care? "I've already been labelled as 'holistic' because I'm interested in nutrition, chronic fatigue syndrome and environmental illness," he says. "I'm already different from others, and 'being different' in Nova Scotia is somewhat of a crime in the medical profession. It's easy to get ostracized." [The practices of two Nova Scotia family physicians, whose methods include homeopathy, were recently investigated. — Ed.]

Speraw doesn't believe that this lack of acceptance is universal. "Occasionally I'll have a client come back to me and say that their doctor was very unsupportive, but I've had others who come back and say their doctor has said to give it a try." She does think that allied health professionals such as nurses and physiotherapists are more open minded about less well-known health care options such as traditional Chinese medicine.

Speraw says that Canadian physicians should consider the cost effectiveness of treatment alternatives. They could, for instance, compare Western and Eastern approaches to the treatment of ulcers. ■



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