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Plenary speech, TCM Kongress 2015, Rothenburg

Dr Andrea Hellwig



The crisis in medical science

A FEW MONTHS AGO, I rushed into a flower shop to buy a bouquet of birthday flowers. I still had to pick up my five-year son from the kindergarten and I was running late. As luck would have it, there was a woman in front of me who wanted to buy some flowers too—the difference being she couldn't decide which flowers she wanted.

She was mumbling in a low voice, taking her time, something I had little of. The woman seemed oblivious to the growing number of impatient customers.

After she finally decided on a bouquet, the florist wrapped them up for her: "Here are your flowers."

The woman replied, "Oh no—those aren't

the right flowers!" After a second prepared bouquet was turned down, even the florist lost her patience and said rather aggressively: "Madam, I don't have all day, could you please make up your mind!"

I was relieved that the florist finally expressed my own growing frustration as I thought of my son's kindergarten getting ready to close. The woman slowly looked up at the florist and said in a shaky voice: "I am so sorry, but these flowers are for my one-year-old son's funeral. He died last week and I am just not sure what kind of flowers he would have loved."

Can you imagine how ashamed I felt at that moment? Here I was getting ready to pick up my child and this mother had just



The Lantern is a journal of Chinese medicine and its related fields with an emphasis on the traditional view and its relevance to clinic. Our aim is to encourage access to the vast resources in this tradition of preserving and restoring health, whether via translations of works of past centuries or observations from our own generation working with these techniques. The techniques are many, but the traditional perspective of the human as an integral part, indeed a reflection, of the social, meteorological and cosmic matrix remains one. We wish to foster that view.

lost hers. I felt overwhelmed by compassion for this grieving mother.

This was an “*aha*” moment for me: in this small, moving moment I realised the importance of keeping your mind open for other information, other perspectives, resulting in other conclusions. I had been guilty of assuming the obvious.

I would like to talk about perspectives and paradigms, about obstacles and opportunities. How Western science and its medicine see the world, and the set of ideas it uses to understand and explain that world.

How many of us agree we are faced with a medical crisis in the Western world?

Dr Sean Murphy described this crisis and the challenges our European healthcare system faces at the ETCMA general assembly in Prague this year. He said, “The rates of common diseases, such as diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, cancer, etc. in European countries are increasing dramatically, the patient’s satisfaction with conventional medical care is decreasing and at the same time we are looking at a future with steadily increasing health-care costs.”

And I would like to talk about the real roots of this medical crisis, and how this problem could be solved. For that I invite you for a small exploration of the methodology of science.

Modern Western scientific thought is rooted in the assumption or so-called postulate that science is completely neutral. Any subjectivity that arises in the observer is excluded. This means that judgment is based solely on external facts; individual personal impressions, feelings and opinions are not considered. Western medicine is based on a principle of purism, which is seen as pure observation with no disruption from subjective factors.

As a counterpoint to that, take for example, one of the great minds of the 18th & 19th centuries, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe’s subjective observations of nature were the basis of his methodology. And he was the last famous representative of this methodology in Western science. He collected plants from different locations and growing conditions. He made detailed drawings of the plants and comprehensive comparisons between their shapes, sizes, colour, growth patterns, etc.

In stark contrast to Goethe’s subjective methodology, modern science gains information from plants using sterile laboratory conditions where various high-tech instruments are used. In this modern methodology plant components and characteristics are categorised according to their chemical constituents. Subjective information is not considered because it will render so-called objective observations impure.

Western science aims to derive objective and predictable statements about respective subjects or objects using reductionism. Therefore by reducing the examined object’s attributes, casual relations should emerge that lead to predictable, safe results. The aim is a value-free and therefore also a culture-free, logical science that leads to objective and generally accepted statements. Western science seeks to identify eternal truths that hold up consistently over time.

Against this background, Western scientists claim that only they adequately reflect reality and therefore are able to derive universal statements about the cosmos and human existence. The Western scientific system claims the authority to interpret and be superior to any other science. More precisely Western science takes the view that there could be no other scientific system outside its own. This is the map, the central paradigm, that Western science uses to understand and explain medicine.

I would like to add here that it’s not all so bleak! There has been serious discussion to review and possibly revoke this postulate of science thinking. For example, constructive realism, a branch in the philosophy of science that shows a way to keep the traditional convictions of scientific knowledge while acknowledging the constructive character of thinking.

What are the consequences of this Western medicine paradigm? And how many serious errors have resulted from its limited perspectives?

In its present state, (1) Western medicine doesn’t accept other perspectives for explaining human physiology and pathology. (2) Western medicine’s methods of empirical research are not questioned and are also used uncritically as benchmarks for evaluating other medical systems. And (3) Western

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Can you imagine how ashamed I felt at that moment?

■ Dr Andrea Hellwig is president of the AGTCM.

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medicine claims to have sovereignty over truth in all medical aspects.

To illustrate this point just look at this absurd paradox: German statutory health insurance companies will cover Chinese medicine treatments only when Western medical doctors do the procedure, regardless of their educational level in Chinese medicine, or their personal and professional understanding of this completely different medical system.

If we want to change this situation, we first have to change ourselves. To change ourselves effectively, we have to change our perceptions.

So what are our perceptions? How do we form them? Where do they come from?

I believe perceptions are the result of the map we use to navigate through life. This map can be called our paradigm, being the set of ideas we use for understanding and explaining something.

The paradigm of Western medicine is limited, it lacks all the necessary perspectives that we need to heal effectively. I believe these limitations are the underlying causes of our medical crisis.

Western medicine is similar to my experience in the flower shop. We both are drawing wrong conclusions by our limited views of the situation. These limitations in Western medicine originate in the very foundations of Western science and its methodology.

To better illustrate the current map Western medicine is using, imagine this. You are in Berlin as a tourist and your destination is the famous Brandenburg Gate. You are great at using maps. You are in great shape, so walking is not a problem. You also have optimism that you will eventually find your destination.

But no matter how optimal your behavior, how high your education, how positive your attitude, you are not going to find the Brandenburg Gate. You won't find the Brandenburg Gate because you are holding a map of London. The Brandenburg Gate is not even on your map!

So what if we could make a powerful paradigm shift by using a different map? A map that contains the Chinese medical perspective with its over 2000 years of medical wisdom located on it?

Imagine the important consequences this

new paradigm would hold for our healthcare system: dramatically increase the health and well-being of our population, significantly decrease the cost of healthcare services, and greatly reduce illness.

As Thomas Kuhn, a prominent Western philosopher of the 20th century, said in his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, every significant breakthrough in the field of scientific endeavour is first a break with tradition, with old ways of thinking, with old paradigms.

To solve our medical crisis, the Western medical system needs to break with its tradition and change its paradigms. And as TCM health practitioners we can make this change happen!

Real sustainable change needs to happen from the inside out, and I think this has to be a patient-driven process. This means the change in thinking and in perspectives has to begin with our patients.

When our patients begin to have more and more "aha" experiences regarding the healing benefits of TCM, they will seek out more practitioners, and when these services are not available or not covered by their health insurances, our patients will take it to a political level, demanding with their voices and their votes that change happens in their health-care options.

How can we help patients have eye-opening experiences, that are so powerful they take action? Firstly, we could pursue the highest quality education in Chinese medicine—as the AGTCM here in Germany does. To be an effective practitioner, we need to have in-depth knowledge and experience of Chinese medicine and its cultural roots.

Secondly, we could raise our personal awareness: how well do we listen to our patients? How do we interact with our patients on an energetic, communicative and physical level?

Thirdly, we could raise our professional awareness: how are Chinese medicine practitioners different from conventional doctors? We don't just ask about the diseased foot, we ask our patients about their entire well-being. We don't look at symptoms in isolation from the whole person. We don't just treat symptoms, we also treat the root of diseases.

We have a different perspective on health

and well-being, and we can help start a patient-driven change in health-care by being aware of our difference and being highly competent in our knowledge.

We all are part of a collective consciousness. Working together, within our different practices, healing patients with our in-depth knowledge of Chinese medicine and its associated culture we can make a difference.

This little a ripple could become a wave that could change the world of medicine as we know it today.

I know it won't be easy. Change never is. People are resistant to change because it involves dealing with the unknown and that is arousing fear. In this new paradigm, there will be new ideas, new interpretations, as well as new questions and new problems.

Nelson Mandela once said, "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it."

In the West, we look for our courage and in

the East, we look for our water element. The Chinese say that water is the most powerful element because it is perfectly nonresistant. It can wear away a rock and sweep away all that is before it. At the same time it is soft and flexible and is able to overcome almost all obstacles.

With our courage, with our water element, we are challenged to heal our medical crisis, by healing our patients, one Chinese medicine treatment at a time.

Great achievements happen with many small heroic steps!

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