

# Can Traditional Chinese Medicine Offer Hope?

The diagnosis of irritable bowel syndrome, ulcerative colitis, or Crohn's disease is something each patient dreads. It is frightening enough to learn that we have a chronic condition that could affect us for the foreseeable future, but adding to the initial worry is uncertainty around the treatments.

For people with acute conditions, such as a broken bone caused by a car accident, or pneumonia brought on by a virus, surgery or pharmaceutical products generally give immediate and certain relief. On the other hand, the treatment for chronic illnesses, including those of the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, is much more complex and uncertain.

Naturally enough, doctors want to relieve pain and control the unpleasant symptoms of the illness, and patients will usually try the remedy their doctor offers. Who wouldn't want to be rid of extreme bloating, constipation (or diarrhea), or the feeling that one's innards are trying to process a bale of barbed wire?

Many of the drug therapies that physicians prescribe don't cure the problem; they treat the symptoms. When patients respond well to the drugs, they will hold the symptoms at bay, sometimes for a short time, sometimes for quite a while. On the other hand, if patients don't

respond well to the prescribed drug, they might experience unpleasant and even debilitating side effects, and still no symptom relief. Their doctors will then try another drug that might work better and, if necessary, try another and another.

Unlike the broken arm or pneumonia situations, there is no one-size-fits-all drug that, if taken according to direction, will enable the physician to tell the patient some weeks or months later, "You are cured of your GI tract illness!" The goal for most doctors dealing with these and other chronic illnesses, including type II diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and heart disease, is to control the symptoms of the particular disease so the patient can live a full, productive, and pain-free life.

While patients appreciate the efforts of their concerned doctors and the benefits of advanced drug therapy, the reality that, in many cases, they are only managing, not curing, their chronic illness is deeply unsatisfying. Surely there is something that could lead to a cure, to a situation where the symptoms of the illness were but an awful memory and not a lurking threat.

Some of the one-third of Canadians with at least one chronic health condition<sup>1</sup> are turning to Eastern medicine, hoping that it can offer some benefit.

## STORY BY

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Kristin has an MA from the University of British Columbia. She has had a long interest in health and the causes of disease.

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For those wanting to know more about how TCM and Western medicine are working together to help treat GI tract illnesses, Dr. Joseph Sung and Dr. Jeffrey Bland will both be speaking to a colloquium in Vancouver on September 26, 2015. For full details, please see <https://www.drrogersprize.org/>

**Photo of Dr. Joseph Sung**

Dr. Sung is a world leader in gastroenterological research.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is attractive because it doesn't look only at a patient's symptoms. It takes a holistic approach and examines the patient's physiological and psychological make-up to try to determine why the person has those symptoms in the first place. Once the TCM practitioner has determined why the patient has the problem and how it is manifesting, she or he will offer a treatment that could involve some combination of gentle exercise, herbal therapy, and acupuncture. Each patient is unique, so the combination of herbs in the herbal therapy and acupuncture treatments are individually specialized.<sup>2</sup>

These treatments and the individualized approach are reassuring and comforting, but the big question is, do they work? Western trials of TCM are generally inconclusive. Despite that, many patients who are anxious for a cure and who appreciate the individualized approach of Eastern medicine seek out TCM.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, there is a lot of research underway seeking out the connections between TCM and Western medicine, and

what each discipline can learn from the other. Dr. Joseph Sung from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, for instance, is a world leader in gastroenterological research who, for years, has been actively exploring how Chinese and Western medicine can collaborate.

Dr. Sung is no Pollyanna. In 2003, he worked 'in the trenches' personally leading his medical team in the fight against SARS.<sup>4</sup> He appreciates the benefits and challenges of both approaches to medicine and warns of the "unresolved differences in perspectives between complementary medicine and Western medicine" and the "real or perceived lack of evidence of the effectiveness"<sup>5</sup> of TCM. He is actively working to bring some of the Western measurement processes to TCM, particularly in the treatment of chronic illnesses, including GI tract diseases. His research attempts to determine whether and how the Western gold standard for assessing research – the double-blind study – can work for evaluations of TCM. Sung also recognizes that the safety, quality, and efficacy of proprietary Chinese medicine

1 CNA NurseOne. Chronic Disease. Available at: <https://www.nurseone.ca/en/knowledge-features/chronic-disease>. Accessed 2015-05-03.

2 Organic Themes. Irritable Bowel Syndrome: A Chinese Medicine Perspective. Available at: [http://balfourhealing.com/?page\\_id=107](http://balfourhealing.com/?page_id=107). Accessed 2015-05-03.

3 Vincent C *et al.* Why Do Patients Turn to Complementary Medicine? An Empirical Study. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 1996;35:37-48.

4 Chinese University of Hong Kong. Biography for Professor Joseph J.Y. Sung, SBS, JP. Available at: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/governance/officers/joseph-sung/english/biography.html>. Accessed 2015-05-14.

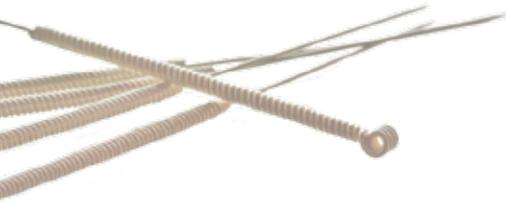
5 Zollman C *et al.* Herbal Medicine. *British Medical Journal*. 1999;319:1050.

6 Lipman F. *Total Renewal*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. New York, NY: Penguin Group; 2003.

7 Major G *et al.* Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Inflammatory Bowel Disease and the Microbiome. *Current Opinion in Endocrinology, Diabetes and Obesity*. 2014;21(1):15-21.

8 Kennedy PJ *et al.* Irritable Bowel Syndrome: A Microbiome-Gut-Brain Axis Disorder? *World Journal of Gastroenterology* 2014;20(39):14105-25.

9 Sung JJ *et al.* Agreements among traditional Chinese medicine practitioners in the diagnosis and treatment of irritable bowel syndrome. *Alimentary Pharmacology & Therapeutics*. 2004;20(10):1205-10.



10 Zollman C *et al.* Herbal Medicine. *British Medical Journal*. 1999;319:1050.

11 Joseph Sung (n.d.), *Integrative Medicine: East Meets West*, PowerPoint presentation. <<https://mail.google.com/mail/?tab=wm#inbox/14d2f1b852735b59?projector=1>>, as of May 15, 2015.

12 Frank Lipman (2003), *Total Renewal*, Penguin Group: 8.

13 Major G *et al.* Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Inflammatory Bowel Disease and the Microbiome, *Current Opinion in Endocrinology, Diabetes and Obesity*. 2014;21(1):15-21.

14 Kennedy PJ *et al.* Irritable Bowel Syndrome: A Microbiome-Gut-Brain Axis Disorder? *World Journal of Gastroenterology* 2014;20(39):14105-25.

15 Sung *et al.*, 2004.

are ongoing concerns.

Dr. Sung is not alone in the search for integration. Dr. Jeffrey Bland, who created the Functional Medicine Institute in Washington State, is recognized worldwide for creating “a new model of medicine that combines modern Western knowledge drawn from biochemistry and physiology with ancient Chinese wisdom and its concepts of balance and the interconnectedness of all things.”<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, researchers are increasing their investigations into the vast and complex microbiome. There are 10 times as many individual microbes living in and on each person as there are human cells in our bodies. There is such a wide variety of microbes that microbial genes affecting the body outnumber human genes by 100 times. Researchers want to determine the role the microbiome plays in a variety of chronic diseases and are just beginning to understand the microbiome’s effects

on the operation of the immune system. Innovative research is focusing on the link between the microbiome and the brain, including a link between IBD and depression.<sup>7,8</sup>

The rigorous analytical assessment of TCM by Dr. Sung and other researchers offers great encouragement to patients in both the East and West. For those in the West who want to ‘see the numbers’ behind any treatments they are given, and want to know that the therapies they are taking actually work, Dr. Sung’s research is starting to answer some of those questions for TCM. Meanwhile, for patients who crave a holistic, individualized approach to their health, different research is beginning to show where TCM is most effective. It is also encouraging that a key focus in the exploration of the link between Western and Chinese medicine focuses particularly on GI tract diseases.<sup>9</sup>

## Dr. Rogers Prize Colloquium

### Traditional Chinese Medicine and the Microbiome: A Modern Context for an Ancient Practice

Saturday, September 26, 2015 | 1:00 to 5:00 pm  
Vancouver Convention Centre ~ West Building

Program includes:

#### Dr. Joseph J.Y. Sung, SBS, JP

Vice-Chancellor/President, Chinese University of Hong Kong  
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