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Editorial

Publishing scientifically sound papers in Traditional and Complementary Medicine



A B S T R A C T

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Non-conventional medical practices that make use of dietary supplements, herbal extracts, physical manipulations, and other practices typically associated with folk and Traditional Medicine are increasingly becoming popular in Western Countries. These practices are commonly referred to by the generic, all-inclusive term “Complementary and Alternative Medicine.” Scientists, practitioners, and medical institutions bear the responsibility of testing and proving the effectiveness of these non-conventional medical practices in the interest of patients. In this context, the number of peer-reviewed journals and published articles on this topic has greatly increased in the recent decades. In this editorial article, we illustrate the policy of the Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine for publishing solid and scientifically sound papers in the field of Traditional and Complementary Medicine.

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1. Introduction

The term “Complementary and Alternative Medicine” (CAM; 補充與替代醫學 *bǔ chōng yǔ tì dài yī xué*) encompasses a variety of non-conventional medical and health practices that include the use of herbal remedies and dietary supplementation, Traditional Medicine, mind-body interventions, and acupuncture, among others. In some cases, these practices are used in place of conventional orthodox medicine, which justifies their connotation as “alternative,” though in most situations these practices are used together with conventional medical treatments, which justifies their connotation as “complementary.” Although these medical practices are known since ancient times, the use of these practices has greatly increased in recent decades, mainly due to the failure of orthodox medicine in the treatment of certain diseases. More and more patients turn to these medical practices because of their frustration and desperation regarding the limitations and side effects of conventional medicine. The term “integrative medicine” is used

when the “complementary” health treatments are offered along with conventional treatments. Yet, we can agree with Angell and Kassirer (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1998, 339: 839–841) that “*There cannot be two kinds of medicine – conventional and alternative. There is only medicine that has been adequately tested and medicine that has not, medicine that works and medicine that may or may not work.*” We must stress, however, that the so-called “alternative” medical practices are diverse in their foundations and methodologies. In this respect, mixing up all the non-conventional medical practices in one pot (as so-called “CAM”) and judging their validity collectively is wrong. There is an objective difference in the modality of how can work the acupuncture, herbal remedies, nutritional supplements, or body-mind interventions, and therefore different methods and standards for judging their effectiveness must be used. Still, we agree that there is no space for “magic” or “miracles” in medicine, and anecdotes and speculations cannot substitute for scientific evidence.

It is widely agreed that orthodox (conventional) therapies are based on scientific grounds, and in most cases have been tested for their safety and effectiveness in controlled clinical settings. On the contrary, the safety and effectiveness of CAM practices still constitute a major concern for their acceptance in the scientific community. Additional criticisms refer to the scarce reliability and lack of scientific grounds of the claimed therapeutic effects of CAM. Although we can argue against the absolute veracity of these criticisms, there are no doubts about the need for rigorous scientific testing of the validity of CAM in the interest of patients. In addition, we cannot neglect the possibility of adverse side effects of certain

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Abbreviations: AE, Associate Editor; CAM, complementary and alternative medicine; EBM, Editorial Board Member; IATCM, International Association for Traditional and Complementary Medicine; ICTCMH, International Conference of Traditional and Complementary Medicine on Health; OES, overall evaluation sheet; JTCM, Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine.

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CAM remedies, or of their negative synergism with current orthodox medical treatments. Therefore, a thorough investigation on the molecular and pathophysiological mechanisms of action of CAM treatments is mandatory.

To this end, we need the help of chemists, cell and molecular biologists, pathologists and physiologists, and clinicians. Large, controlled, and randomized clinical trials must prove the efficacy of CAM treatments. In addition, studies at cellular and molecular levels are needed to provide a solid scientific ground for their use, as are studies that confirm the quality, safety, and reliability of the treatment. Further, it is fundamental to share and integrate this knowledge in an open platform available to a wide audience of experts who can judge and criticize these studies.

The Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine (JTCM) is a peer-reviewed biomedical journal with this vocation. Among the various journals dedicated to CAM, JTCM stands for its unique goals by focusing on the relevance of Traditional and Complementary Medicine. In fact, the JTCM represents the ideal platform for studies on those auxiliary practices (including all traditional medical practices, dietary habits, integrative therapies with nutritional supplements and herbal extracts, and mental-physical activities) that can be of “complement” in preventive and curative medicine.

The JTCM was first launched, under the auspices of the Taiwanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, almost four years ago under the editorship of Lee-Yan Sheen, who very recently (November 2015) has appointed Ciro Isidoro as his close associate (see the timeline of the journal's development in [Appendix 1](#)). The main goal of the new team, which includes Chia-Chi Huang as Managing Editor and all members of the Editorial Board, is to shape the JTCM into a high-impact journal in the CAM and Biomedical Science categories. The mission of JTCM is to disseminate the knowledge on whether and how complementary and integrative health interventions can maintain and improve health and can contribute to health care. The JTCM pursues this aim through the publication of rigorous scientific studies that prove the usefulness and safety of such interventions. In order to most effectively pursue its mission, the JTCM will exploit its natural affinity and operational link with the International Association of Traditional and Complementary Medicine (IATCM). Readers and manuscript authors wishing to become members of the IATCM can do so through a simple registration at the <http://www.iatcm.org/> website. Following, we illustrate the policy of JTCM for publishing solid and scientifically sound papers in the field of Traditional and Complementary Medicine.

1.1. Our commitment to readers: the papers we wish to publish

We aim to provide the communities of scientists and practitioners with a global platform for discussion, perspectives, and research on Traditional and Complementary Medicine. To this end, we publish original articles in the following categories: 1. Full research articles and short communications, and 2. Reviews and mini-reviews. In addition, we accept letters and commentaries to the editor in which the readers can comment, discuss, and criticize the articles published and provide suggestions to improve the strategy and policy of the journal. Finally, we are open to publish the scientific report of international conferences on CAM-related topics (please contact our Managing Editor for your proposal).

The Journal covers Traditional Medicine, herbal medicine, folk medicine, preventive medicine, dietary therapy/nutrition supplements, and mind-body therapies, as well as reviews on historical, philosophical, and social-cultural aspects of traditional and folk medicine, other traditional and complementary therapies. The

JTCM encourages submissions on experimental investigations in translational and clinical studies, animal experiments, and *in vivo/in vitro* disease models. Further, the JTCM calls for articles that emphasize the pathophysiological basis and cellular-molecular mechanisms that underlie the beneficial effects of Traditional and Complementary Medicine. We wish to stress that the JTCM considers the Quality Control, the procedures for the preparation and characterization, and the authentication of herbal medicines and dietary supplements as basic requirements to guarantee efficacy, safety, and reproducibility in Traditional and Complementary Medicine.

1.2. Benefits for authors of JTCM

There are several reasons to choose the JTCM for the publication of your next work.

The [Online submission system](#) is user-friendly, and the [manuscript check-list](#) allows for rapid management of the manuscript. The reviewing process is convenient based on several aspects (see [Section 1.4](#)). We offer the Open Access Service to enhance the diffusion of the papers published, and we do not apply any publication fee for this service. To keep the scientific community informed on our latest publications, we will send a regular **e-alert of the Table of Contents** (an email with the list of the articles published in the journal) of the current JTCM issue to all IATCM members and registered readers (you can request the service through the function “[Subscribe to new volume alerts](#)” on Elsevier ScienceDirect).

The editors realize the importance of a timely publication, which keeps the readers updated with the latest discoveries and is useful for authors as they apply for academic promotion or for funding support. Therefore, the JTCM promotes the **e-Pub ahead-of-print** (also called “**Articles in Press**”) of the article within ten days of acceptance and after the authors have completed all the formalities required by the publisher (such as signing the copyright forms and proofreading). Finally, we offer the **Cover** of the current issue for the most significant (and beautiful) image of the published work.

1.3. Responsibility and benefits for reviewers of the JTCM

Reviewers are recruited by the Associate Editor (AE) and offer their assistance to assess the value of a manuscript on a voluntary basis. Reviewers remain anonymous to authors. The reviewer must have no *Conflict of Interest* with the author(s) and are required to adhere to ethical guidelines that mandate strict confidentiality about the content of the manuscript. The reviewers are responsible for assessing the manuscript, and must be rigorous in judging the originality and appropriateness of the methods. Further, reviewers are asked to provide the authors with constructive criticisms to help them to improve their work.

Reviewers who wish to submit their own work to the JTCM should mention in the cover letter the services they have provided for the Journal in order to benefit a fast-track reviewing process. We guarantee that papers submitted by our reviewers enter the peer review process. If you want to become a JTCM reviewer, please contact our Managing Editor (Dr Chia-Chi Huang) at jtcm.me777@gmail.com. You may also join IATCM and express your willingness to be included in the database of potential reviewers.

1.4. The reviewing process: defining the OES

The Editor-in-Chief and Vice Editor-in-Chief (hereafter, the Editors) realize that reviewers and AEs devote much of their time to the assessment of a manuscript. Their objective evaluation of the

manuscript is of paramount importance to decide whether the manuscript deserves a possible publication. The final decision is made by the Editor-in-Chief (who may consult with the Vice Editor-in-Chief) based on the AE's recommendation. The editors also realize that manuscript authors are eager to be informed of the decision and comments on their paper in a very short time. The editors, therefore, aim to provide the manuscript authors with a timely review and speedy publication. In order to speed up the reviewing process and to facilitate the objective judgment of the publication suitability of the manuscript, we have arranged a form called an "Overall Evaluation Sheet" (OES) in which each single important parameter is scored with a value ranging from 0 (for "not at all") to 3 (for "high"). The mathematical sum of these values guides the AE in proposing the final decision.

1.5. The OES

The OES is attached in [Appendix 2](#) and can be downloaded from the website of the Journal. It is apparent from the evaluation score the importance we give to the originality of the work and the methodology used. Observational studies, repetitive studies, studies whose rationale is not based on solid scientific grounds, and studies employing methods that do not comply with scientific standards for reproducibility and reliability are unlikely to be considered for peer review. In addition, we provide a transparent, friendly, rigorous, constructive, and rapid review of manuscripts.

1.5.1. What we mean by "rapid"

We strive to make a first decision within six weeks of the initial submission. For invited reviews, we can make a decision within two to three weeks following the submission, calling upon Editorial Board members (EBMs) for the reviewing process. Authors can help to speed up the reviewing process (see [Section 1.7](#)).

1.5.2. What we mean by "transparent"

Authors can suggest up to five reviewers, and may attach to the manuscript the OES scored by the reviewers of their choice. The OES with the scores of all sections and the final score is published online along with the manuscript. Note that the comments to authors and editors remain confidential, and the identity of the reviewers will not be disclosed.

1.5.3. What we mean by "rigorous"

The manuscript will be evaluated by at least two independent reviewers. When deemed necessary, the AE and/or the Editor-in-Chief or the Vice Editor-in-Chief will further assess the manuscript.

1.5.4. What we mean by "friendly" and "constructive"

Reviewers will provide constructive criticisms in a friendly, communicative form in order to help the authors improve their work.

1.6. Becoming a member of the Editorial Board: not only duties!

Associate Editor (AE) and Editorial Board members (EBM), listed at <http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-traditional-and-complementary-medicine/editorial-board/>, help the Editors in selecting the highest quality papers for publication in the JTCM. The AEs and EBMs are asked to recruit and oversee appropriate peer reviewers for the manuscript who are experts in the field, and to provide the editors with a recommendation for rejection, revision, or publication. The most appropriate reviewers can be chosen from a database available on the platform. We are making every effort to implement the list of experts in order to offer AEs

a wide range of potential reviewers. In addition, AEs and EBMs are responsible for soliciting the reviewers' report in due time.

The AEs and EBMs may themselves read and assess the manuscript, and in some cases this is in fact advisable. This is particularly required especially if reviewers' reports are contrasting, or if both reviewers propose acceptance with no or minor revisions. AEs and EBMs can make a recommendation based on the score system of the OES.

The AEs and EBMs are invited by the Editor-in-Chief and are appointed for an initial term of three years. The AEs and EBMs are selected based on their renowned expertise in the field, as witnessed by their publication record of articles published in peer-reviewed journals. The AEs and EBMs are required to be members of the IATCM and to attend the International Conference of Traditional and Complementary Medicine on Health (ICTCMH), during which occasion the Editorial Board gathers to discuss strategies to improve the Journal. The ICTCMH 2015 was held in Taipei in October 24–27th, 2015 (see the Conference Report in this issue). The AEs and EBMs should promote the JTCM, as a reference journal in the field of Traditional and Complementary Medicine, during any occasion and event and in their own institution. To this end, they shall also solicit the submission of papers from their colleagues. In addition, AEs and EBMs are required to directly contribute to the success of the JTCM by submitting their own work to the Journal. In particular, AEs and EBMs should contribute with at least a review (or mini-review) and a research article (or short-communication) during their tenure on the Editorial Board. Despite the workload, becoming a member of the Editorial Board is an honor.

1.6.1. Want to become an AE or EBM?

The editors are considering reshaping the composition of the Editorial Board in order to include active members who can provide expertise in all fields of Traditional and Complementary Medicine, and who can assure their constant contribution to the Journal. You may propose your candidature to join the Editorial Board to the Editor-in-Chief if, apart from being an expert in the field and an active author, you meet one or more of the following criteria: 1. You have served as a reviewer for the JTCM for at least five years; 2. You have reviewed at least twenty papers for the JTCM; 3. You have contributed to the JTCM with at least two reviews (or mini-reviews) and three original papers.

1.7. Finally: the 'what to do' list for your submission

Authors must submit their manuscripts through the web link and follow the "Instructions for Authors" found on the Journal's website (<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-traditional-and-complementary-medicine/>). Only papers that fit into the scope of the Journal (see [Section 1.1](#)) can be considered for peer review. Before submitting a manuscript, we strongly suggest that authors assess their work objectively filling out the OES. Authors should keep in mind that the JTCM is willing to publish only papers of high quality, and that reviewers and editors will pay attention to the originality of the message and the methods employed. We encourage authors to regularly read the articles published in the JTCM and to refer to them whenever it is appropriate. To help authors, a "checklist" is provided on the online submission platform.

In order to speed up the reviewing process, authors should:

- indicate the field/topic of interest
- suggest one or two appropriate AE experts in that field
- suggest up to five potential reviewers (experts in the field with no conflict of interest)

- ask two or three reviewers to pre-assess the manuscript by filling out the Section 1.1 of the OES and attach these documents to the cover letter along with contact details of the potential reviewers. The editor may or may not contact one or more of these reviewers and ask for a thorough assessment of the manuscript by filling out all sections of the OES, including the “Specific Comments to Authors and to Editors.”

2. Concluding remarks

In the interest of the scientific community and of patients, the JTCM acknowledges the need for the rigorous scientific testing of the validity of CAM practices. To this end, the JTCM will only publish papers of high quality that report experimental investigations on the effectiveness of CAM treatments in clinical studies, animal experiments, and *in vivo/in vitro* disease models. Emphasis will be given to the pathophysiological basis and the cellular-molecular mechanisms that underlie the beneficial effects of Traditional and Complementary Medicine. The Journal's Editorial Office offers an efficient, constructive, and friendly (though rigorous) peer review evaluation of the manuscript.

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We thank our authors, reviewers, AEs, and EBMs. Their work is fundamental to elevate the reputation of the JTCM, and indirectly to serve the communities of practitioners and of patients.

Finally, we wish to thank all of our readers who wish to share their comments and criticisms on the work published, and to offer suggestions to improve the strategies and policies of the Journal.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jtcme.2015.12.005>.

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