The wide range of topics and types of study that are submitted to the European Journal of Integrative Medicine is impressive. The breadth of international activity in research in this area adds to the variety of articles.

Research into complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and integrative medicine has substantially increased over the last few years. Based on a significant change in how health professionals and patients view complementary and integrative approaches to health, the increase is also due to integrative practitioners becoming more interested in carrying out, prioritizing and understanding research [1]. In the UK, the 2009 King’s Fund Advisory Group report ‘Assessing complementary practice: building consensus on appropriate research methods’ advised researchers, funders and practitioners to collaborate and contribute to the understanding of complementary practice [2].

Despite the increasing popularity and use of complementary practice, the evidence base for CAM still remains relatively small. The lack of research is compounded by a lack of agreement on research methods, leading to criticism and scepticism. Most health professionals agree that we need more research into the potential role of CAM and integrative medicine. Although much research has not been scientifically or statistically strong enough to show the benefits or risks of therapies, this is improving. Indeed, governments and other organizations in many countries are now funding reliable, high quality scientific research.

In addition to the resource issues (especially those of obtaining funding and the lack of complementary therapists with research experience and knowledge), there are several methodological concerns identified with research in this area. These include design difficulties for appropriate clinical trials in certain therapies, for example with acupuncture, consideration of placebo and non-specific practitioner effects [3], identification of appropriate controls [4] and understanding the mechanisms operating [5] pose specific challenges to the researcher.

It is important that rigorous, interdisciplinary and international collaborative research is undertaken in order to investigate efficacy, safety and cost-effectiveness and to promote analytical thinking in this area. The goal is not to be promotional, derogatory or biased, but to demonstrate objectivity. The Good practice in Traditional Chinese Medicine (GP-TCM) project, funded by the European Commission, has demonstrated the importance of international networking in such research [6,7]. In April, the Journal of Ethno Pharmacology devoted an open access Special Issue, which disseminated the project outcomes, the direction for future research and demonstrated the importance of international collaborations [7].

Research into CAM and integrative medicine is obviously important for many reasons, including: to ensure safety; identify potentially harmful interactions with other treatments (including but not necessarily limited to those of conventional medication); assess whether specific therapies work and do what they claim to do; test therapies against other already accepted treatments to see if they work as well or better; explore any improvements in quality of life; understand mechanisms of action; and last, but not least, to demonstrate whether they are cost effective.

Rigorous research is important for any medical intervention. Anecdotal evidence alone is not acceptable proof that something works or it is safe. Believing that a particular diet or herb has helped a patient is not enough. It is always important to consider whether improvements in their health could be due to a coincidence, another medicine they have taken or something else they have done. This is the reason why research is so important.

The articles in this issue cover a range of health issues and methodologies from researchers in Korea, China, Spain, India, Peru, Taiwan and Germany. A comprehensive systematic review of randomised and non randomised trials on acupuncture and IVF using Chinese and Western databases provides useful guidelines and recommendations to improve clinical trial design [6]. The importance of considering pattern diagnosis and disease differentiation in East Asian medicine is highlighted in three papers: a review paper on rheumatoid arthritis [8] and in two papers from Taiwan [9,10] on the use and testing of an instrument which may help in quantifying how physicians diagnose. This instrument has possible implications for future trials where pattern differentiation is increasingly being used, and needs quantification. An RCT on Bee venom acupuncture, the practice of injecting purified bee venom into acupuncture points widely used in Korea, appears to be effective for chronic low back pain and relatively safe – although this study also still has, it should be noted, the intrinsic limitation related to appropriate controls [11].
Kanitz et al. evaluate the impact of Eurythmy Therapy for patients experiencing fatigue and demonstrate improvements in symptoms. They suggest that this has been achieved by reducing autonomic regulatory activity [12]. Chen et al. look at the importance of providing integrated outcome assessments to increase patient satisfaction when TCM and Western medicine are combined [13]. In particular, they highlight the implications this has for the training and education of pharmacists.

There are 6 herbal studies in this issue: 4 human trials, 1 laboratory study and one animal study [14–19]. Improvements in fasting blood glucose levels have been shown using *Artemisia princeps* Pampanini for people with pre-diabetes [14] and using modified Ling-Gui-Zhu-Gan decoction for people with poorly controlled diabetes [15]. Safoof habis, a Unani formulation for menorrhagia, is apparently as effective as standard medication in patients attending gynaecology outpatient clinics [16]. Ephedra and green tea extract use has indicated a significant effect on thigh circumference and fasting free fatty acid levels in treating localized fat in overweight women [17]. The cytotoxic effects exerted by *Ganoderma Lucidum* on peripheral blood mononuclear cells may have a potential role in leukaemia [18]. Finally, a study from Peru [19] reports positive effects on the fertility and estrogenic activity in mice using *Turraeanthus africanus* in combination with *Lepidium meyenii* (black maca).

In the last issue, our new student section featured probably one of the first qualitative studies carried out in China, exploring cancer patients’ expectations, knowledge, attitudes and barriers to using Chinese medicine [20]. In this issue, postgraduate research again features with the double peer reviewed abstracts (oral and poster presentations) from the CAMSTRAND Conference held in Cardiff in April 2012, demonstrating graduate research activity in the UK in CAM and other integrated approaches to health [21]. This annual MPhil/PhD conference is specifically designed for researchers beginning their research career in order for them to have the opportunity to submit their work through a robust, peer review process and obtain constructive criticism and feedback on their research. The abstracts reflect different stages of the student’s journey, including the research proposal and project design as well as the analysis and interpretation phases of a project. As stated in the last editorial, it is extremely important that we support these early researchers as they build their future careers.

References


