

Principles and Practice of Confucianism in Medicine Today

Are They still Relevant? *By Dr Khong Kok Sun*

Editor's Note:

This article follows from the book review of "Doctors Extraordinaire" in the SMA News June issue, and is only an abridged version. The complete article is available online at http://www.sma.org.sg/sma_news/newscurrent.html

PREAMBLE

It has been my personal observation that the moral and ethical behaviour of doctors and other professionals today have changed from the time of my teachers and role models. I believe there are two reasons for this.

Firstly, the pace of life has changed dramatically, thus leaving one with little time to contemplate one's actions at the end of each day. To "survive", we have acquired the need to prioritise our actions rather than honouring our commitments.

Secondly, upbringing on the right values and virtues by family and peers has been compromised partly because of our reduced contact time with parents, teachers and role models. Our constant acquisition of raw information whether from traditional text in the Medical Library or through the Internet leaves little time for "value transfer" communications.

I hope to show that advocating the teachings of Confucius may reverse a deteriorating facet of medical teaching and practice - that of virtues and moral values. I will present these issues at three levels: the personal level (you), the group (not cluster) level, and the governmental level.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WESTERN AND CHINESE MEDICAL ETHICS

The evolution of medicine varied greatly though both had strong scientific basis and advocated learning by observation, documentation and research. Both also put the patient above self, but it was culture that determined the development of ethics.

In the West, medical ethics was influenced largely by religious beliefs which eventually became laws laid down by government. Practice also followed the Hippocratic oath, which formed the basis of medical ethics as we know it today. Medical and other professional associations formulated

codes of conduct and abandoned individualism for the common good. However, these laws became stiff, and more often than not dictated by society from historical experience. This inflexibility caused them to often lag behind socio-cultural and technological changes. This was evident initially in disputes between abortion and pro-Life advocates, and now by the rapid evolution of technology in the form of web-based knowledge with instant information acquisition, loss of confidentiality, and emergence of life science technology such as genetic modification and cloning. Legislature is unable to find clear answers to guide medical practitioners because ethics was written mainly by non-doctors.

Traditional Chinese physicians were primarily trained more than 5000 years ago to treat royalty. Morality and ethics was paramount. One could not become a doctor before he himself was above reproach. Confucius believed that each person could be taught to know right from wrong. There was also a lack of unified standards because most practitioners were in private practice and medical bodies were non-existent. The practice of medicine was based on individual skills, which were passed on by apprenticeship alongside moral standards and behaviour. Morality and virtue of the physician became of equal importance to medical education and clinical practice. This seems to be a more balanced way of practising Medicine.

CONFUCIUS AND YOU AS A DOCTOR

Confucius propounded⁴ that a man must himself be virtuous before the affairs of family, state and nation could proceed correctly: "There is never a case when the root is in disorder and yet the branches are in order". Man should know what is right and wrong, and he laid down the rules for being a Superior Man: "In his private conduct he is courteous, In serving superiors he is respectful, In providing for the people he is kind, In dealing with people he is just". The proverb I find most difficult for today's doctors to follow is: "Riches and honour are what all men desire, but if they

cannot be attained in accordance with the Tao (right way), they should not be kept; Poverty and low status are what all men hate, but if they cannot avoid it while staying in accordance with the Tao, you should not avoid them".

Modern Chinese medical ethics can be summed up as follows and extracted from Professor Z Guo¹ (See side story).

MODERN CHINESE MEDICAL ETHICS

1. Physicians should appreciate the value of life and rescue the dying and heal the wounded by all means available to them: "In a physician's hands lie the life and death of a patient".
2. A physician should bear the suffering of patients in mind, not his own material interest: "They should not replace precious herbal material by inferior ones, nor charge the poor and wandering monks".
3. Doctors should diligently improve medical skills and oppose careless styles of working: "should concentrate thoroughly and be most careful and absolutely accurate when diagnosing a disease".
4. Physicians should act with decorum, decency and politeness. We should "ask about customs when entering foreign states, ask about forbidden things when entering households, and ask about manners when practising medicine". Chen Shigong pointed out that even a prostitute consulting a doctor: "should be treated as a good lady and the physician should not take liberties with even such a woman".
5. Doctors should acknowledge that all patients are treated equal before him. Tsun Simiao urged that: "whether rich or poor, old or young, beautiful or ugly, close or distant and Chinese or foreign, (patients) should be treated the same as an immediate relative or good friend". Furthermore Gong Tingxian criticised doctors who only liked to give treatment to the rich and neglected the poor.
6. Physicians should respect other professionals' achievements and abide by academic ethics. At that time in feudal China where people in the same occupation despised one another, it was courageous to expound these tenets for physicians. Chen Shigong warned against arrogance and slandering, whilst endorsing humbleness, caution, respect and tolerance.

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Most of us live with the first rule, but we already see some conflict with today's medical practice. For example, the second principle means that staff carparks of public hospitals should not have expensive marquees. The segregation of paying and subsidised wards and clinics, and having a public and private sector goes against the fifth principle. The sixth principle remains today the embodiment of what lawyers call "collaborative silence" amongst physicians when called to court.

The Confucian value of "benevolence" was held in highest respect amongst physicians and it was widely regarded that physicians had the highest and noblest of all morality. The common people also knew their role in respecting elders and those who held high office and skills. This mutual respect between physicians and patients resulted in the development of good doctor-patient relationship: "Physicians should show respect for patients, and patients should choose a sensible physician and comply by taking the medicine prescribed". Unfortunately, our patients today have also been influenced by the same cultural changes we face and likewise lack high virtue and moral values.

CONFUCIANISM AND GROUP PRACTICE

Whether in a hospital department or in a group practice, there are pressures for the individual to climb ahead of colleagues. This often leads to friction, envy, inequality and discontent.

Confucius' most remembered phrase on interpersonal relationships is: "Not doing to others what you don't want done to yourself". For those who are in institutional practice, this verse may be relevant: "Don't worry about not having a good position, worry about the means you use to gain position; ...don't worry about being unknown, seek to be known in the right way".

Confucius dwelt on the singular character of the Superior Man who "Loving study, you approach wisdom; Loving energetic practice, you approach humaneness; Understanding shame, you approach courage. If you understand

these three, you know how to polish your character; Knowing how to polish your character, you know how to handle others; Knowing how to handle others, you know how to govern a state or clan". Making each person in a group give of their best was also a conscious action: "To reward well trustworthiness and loyalty, this is the way to encourage lower officers; Employing people around their own schedules and taxing them lightly, this is the way to encourage the people; Daily and monthly examining their works and giving merit where due, this is the way to encourage artisans. He also said, "If you yourself desire standing, then help others to attain standing; If you yourself want success, then help others to attain success".

Those promoted to high position should "Let go of slander, free oneself from lust, disregard wealth and prize virtue". That which he cannot control in himself, he cannot hope to control in his subordinates. Nowadays, departments are fragmented into teams and the evolution of consultant-based practice is diluting the feeling of belonging, mutual respect, cohesion and pride in a department or hospital. The increased mobility of doctors today, though allowing greater exchange of information and dialogue, is following the way of the production worker who holds no loyalty to an employer and may "defect" for better pay or opportunities.

CONFUCIANISM AND GOVERNMENT HEALTHCARE POLICIES

The value of public practice in Singapore and elsewhere, largely a Confucianistic one, has been incessantly eroded by the processes of restructuring, fee-for-service, part or full cost recovery, and other standard business practices. Many an enterprising doctor then operates within OB markers to maximise gain. To counter the resultant "greed" of the doctor, there must be put in place audit systems, quality assurance programmes, productivity standards, performance bonuses, and litigation. Indeed Confucius said, "If you govern the people legalistically and control them with punishment, they will avoid crime but have no personal sense of shame; If you govern them by means of virtue and control them with propriety, they will gain their

own sense of shame and thus correct themselves". We could say that the leaders of our professions have to take greater responsibility and provide guidance as much as justice. "There are three common mistakes of those who are of rank; To speak when there is nothing to be said, this is imprudence; To be silent when there is something to be said, this is deception; To speak without paying attention to the expression on a person's face, this is called blindness". We still have the opportunity to correct what has drifted off-course provided we can recognise when things go wrong.

CONCLUSIONS

Today's public and rapid technological advances demand that we doctors must evolve a proper way to practice a moral and effective brand of holistic medicine. The medical profession has long lost the respect of many partly because we strayed from the righteous path as expounded not only by Confucius but also by Hippocrates and other oriental and occidental physicians. However the needs of the common man to be healed of disease remains for eternity and only worthy doctors should dispense the cure. We must strive to rise above the materialistic, to be held in esteem again, to treat all fellow human beings as we would our own family. Perhaps this could be attained if we live by the virtues expounded by Confucius and other medical greats of both Chinese and Western cultures.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge that the contents of this article are significantly extracted from the first reference by Guo Zhaojiang, Professor in the Political Department at The Fourth Military Medical University, Xian, The Peoples' Republic of China. ■

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