



Herbal medicine for comprehensive patient care

The use of herbal medicine as part of comprehensive patient care is becoming increasingly widespread world-wide and the World Health Organization now recognises the international need for more integrated policies on herbal medicine use. Although herbal medicines are readily available to the public and are becoming increasingly popular, rigorous research into its safety, effectiveness and quality is still urgently needed in order to inform public policy and clinical decision-making.

Researchers from the University of Southampton will present findings from studies on complementary and herbal medicine at the upcoming European Congress for Integrated Medicine (ECIM) and International Congress for Complementary & Integrative Medicine Research (ICCMR) conference in Berlin. Over 800 researchers, clinical providers, educators, healthcare professionals, commissioners and students will be present to hear about the latest research conducted in the field of complementary medicine and participate in methodological and practical workshops. The programme of herbal research conducted in Southampton contains two broad themes – firstly the evaluation of herbal medicines for conditions where alternatives are urgently needed in primary care, and secondly on improving methodological rigor of herbal research.

One of the biggest motivations supporting herbal medicine research, according to Dr Xiao-Yang (Mio) Hu from the University of Southampton, is the evolving global threat to public health of Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR). The reduction of antibiotic prescribing is now a major priority for the government and the NIHR, and research at the University of Southampton aims to evaluate the effectiveness of herbal medicines as a strategy for reducing the use of antibiotics. Under this theme, Mio will present findings of a recent systematic review on *Andrographis Paniculata* (Chuān Xīn Lián) for symptomatic relief of acute respiratory tract infections (RTIs) and which was conducted in collaboration with the Beijing University of Chinese Medicine. Acute RTIs are predominantly of viral aetiology and antibiotics are of very limited benefit in the majority of uncomplicated infections. The marginal benefit of antibiotics for RTIs are outweighed by increasing AMR and common adverse reactions

leading to unnecessary increases in healthcare costs. Apart from providing a potential alternative for RTIs, this review emphasised the importance - and barriers - of including trials published in Chinese.

Among the workshop presenters is the University of Southampton's Dr Lily Lai. She was supervised by the late Professor George Lewith during her SPCR-funded PhD studies on Chinese herbal medicine. The findings from her PhD studies will be presented in two workshops in Berlin alongside work currently conducted by Dr. Andrew Flower and Dr. Merlin Willcox. The first workshop 'Herbal medicine research: from margins to mainstream' will explore the different research methods used to investigate herbal medicines. The key domains of herbal medicine research such as quality control, batch consistency, interactions with pharmaceuticals, model validity and herbal pharmacokinetics will be highlighted and Lily hopes the workshop will help develop models for future research into herbal medicines: "We envisage these models being able to incorporate appropriately phased projects to form an iterative programme of research. This will optimise pragmatic rigour as well as highlight the clinical relevance of these investigations."

During the second herbal research workshop, the same team from Southampton will present alongside colleagues at UCL and Geneva on how to prioritise traditional treatments for further research. Lily will present on the role of consensus-seeking methods as a way of informing clinical trial protocols. Mio will present on criteria for selecting herbal medicines which will be used to form a standardised guideline of prioritising herbal interventions for systematic reviews. Participants will explore the roles of these novel methods when prioritising plants for further research and critically examine proposed models on defining good practice in herbal-prescribing.

Lily hopes to demonstrate that rigorous approaches can be used thoughtfully to answer clinically meaningful research questions. "The overall aim is to begin building an evidence-base on herbal medicine that is relevant internationally with the end-goal in mind that this evidence will help healthcare commissioners, healthcare professionals and patients make more informed decisions regarding herbal use."