



Integration of Family Medicine and the Characteristics of Traditional Chinese Medicine: Constructing a New Primary Healthcare Model

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Abstract

At the community level, family medicine plays a pivotal role in furnishing all-around and continuous healthcare. Nevertheless, it grapples with multiple bottlenecks, including scarce medical personnel and insufficient technological support, which limit its service depth. Conversely, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), with its holistic view that emphasizes the body's internal balance and strong preventive mindset, brings unique value. Integrating these two is imperative for optimizing primary healthcare, thereby better catering to community health demands. This research systematically assesses the current landscapes of both family medicine and TCM. It elaborates on the multifaceted advantages of their integration, such as improved patient compliance. Practical cases, like applying TCM herbs to manage hypertension, are provided, and potential integration models, such as coordinated home-based care, are explored. The integration of family medicine and TCM is on track to establish a more thorough, efficient, and patient-centered primary healthcare system. This will strongly drive the attainment of universal health coverage and a substantial uplift in national health standards, ultimately benefiting the entire population.

Keywords

Family Medicine; Traditional Chinese Medicine; Integration; Primary Healthcare

1. Research Background

In the context of the constantly evolving global healthcare system, family medicine, with its patient-centered concept, strong focus on prevention, and continuous care, has emerged as a fundamental pillar of primary healthcare (Starfield, B., 1998). Simultaneously, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), with a history spanning thousands of years, has demonstrated remarkable and unique advantages in disease prevention, treatment, health preservation, and promotion (Unschuld, 2013). The integration of family medicine and TCM characteristics holds great promise for creating a more effective and people-oriented primary healthcare model, injecting new impetus into enhancing the overall health quality of the population.

2. The Significance and Current State of Family Medicine

Family medicine, a comprehensive medical discipline, provides diverse services across an individual's life cycle. In childhood, vaccination and growth monitoring are essential. Family doctors can identify potential health problems like developmental delays via regular check-ups and refer children for early intervention (American Academy of Family Physicians, 2024).

In adulthood, it mainly focuses on chronic disease prevention and treatment. With the growing prevalence of diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, family doctors guide patients to adopt healthy lifestyles, manage chronic diseases, and ensure proper medication use and follow-up. For the elderly, long-term care and rehabilitation support are provided, coordinating resources for their complex needs (American Academy of Family Physicians, 2024).

Family doctors, as the core of family medicine, diagnose diseases through physical exams, lab tests, and medical history inquiries, and formulate treatment plans. They also function as health consultants, promoting preventive care and coordinating medical resources. When patients need specialized services, they refer them to appropriate specialists (WONCA, 2024).

Family medicine has become the cornerstone of the healthcare system in many countries. In some European countries, family doctors are the public's first contact for chronic disease prevention. However, a global shortage of general practitioners exists. In 2020, only 20% of EU doctors were general practitioners, resulting in long patient waiting times, overburdened doctors, and negatively impacting healthcare service quality and community health (European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2019; Mackenbach, 2008).

3. The Distinct Value of TCM Features

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has a long and profound history, with rich theoretical and practical knowledge. Its holistic concept, a unique feature, views the body as an integrated whole, emphasizing the unity of man with nature and the social environment. TCM practitioners consider both internal physiological states and external factors like seasons, geography, and social stress in diagnosis and treatment. For instance, in summer, as the body's yang qi is more on the surface, TCM may focus on clearing heat and promoting fluid production (Huang & Zhang, 2018).

The syndrome-differentiation and treatment system lies at the core of TCM. Practitioners use inspection (observing complexion, tongue appearance, and body movements, with the tongue being a key indicator), auscultation and olfaction (listening to sounds and smelling), interrogation (gathering symptoms, history, lifestyle, and emotional info), and palpation (feeling the pulse) for diagnosis. Based on this, they determine the disease syndrome and prescribe herbal formulas or non-drug therapies like acupuncture, tuina, and moxibustion (Wang & Liu, 2018).

TCM offers distinct advantages in chronic disease management. In diabetes treatment, while Western medicine controls blood sugar, TCM can complement by improving overall symptoms, with some herbs having hypoglycemic effects and regulating the body's internal environment. TCM exercises like Tai Chi and Baduanjin benefit patients. Similarly, in hypertension and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, TCM alleviates symptoms, reduces Western medicine dosage, and improves quality of life. The "preventive treatment of disease" concept in TCM, which focuses on disease prevention and recurrence prevention through diet, emotion, and acupoint care, aims to enhance public health literacy (Liu & Liu, 2019; Chen & Li, 2020).

4. Benefits of Integrating Family Medicine and TCM

4.1 Elevating Disease Prevention and Treatment Efficacy

Integrating TCM therapies into family medicine can bring about a significant improvement in disease management. For common ailments such as colds and coughs, TCM's syndrome-based treatment offers a more personalized approach. In TCM, a cold can be classified into different syndromes, such as wind-cold type, wind-heat type, and summer-damp type. For a wind-heat cold, characterized by symptoms like fever, sore throat, and yellowish nasal discharge, TCM doctors may prescribe herbal formulas like Yinqiao San, which can effectively clear heat, relieve the surface, and shorten the course of the disease. In chronic disease management, the combination of TCM and modern medicine has shown great potential. In diabetes treatment, Western medicine is effective in rapidly lowering blood sugar levels, but long-term use of some medications may cause side effects. TCM can help mitigate these side effects. For example, herbs that nourish the yin and tonify the kidney can improve the symptoms of yin deficiency, often associated with diabetes, such as dry mouth and fatigue. At the same time, TCM dietary and exercise guidance can better control the development of the disease and reduce the risk of complications (Zhang & Liu, 2018).

4.2 Strengthening Health Management Capabilities

Family medicine's focus on health management aligns seamlessly with TCM's "preventive treatment of disease"

concept. Family doctors can utilize TCM's constitution-identification methods to conduct a more in-depth assessment of community residents' health risks. TCM classifies individuals into different constitutions, such as qi-deficiency constitution, yang-deficiency constitution, yin-deficiency constitution, and phlegm-damp constitution. For individuals with yang-deficiency constitution, who often feel cold, have weak vitality, and are prone to fatigue, family doctors can recommend warm-natured foods like ginger, cinnamon, and mutton, and suggest appropriate moxibustion health care. For those with phlegm-damp constitution, characterized by symptoms like excessive phlegm, heavy body sensation, and greasy tongue coating, a light diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and foods with diuretic and phlegm-resolving properties, and moderate exercise are recommended. Chinese herbal medicine conditioning can also be used according to the specific situation, which can effectively enhance residents' health awareness and self-care abilities, thus preventing diseases from the very beginning (Wang et al., 2021).

4.3 Optimizing the Medical Service Experience

TCM therapies such as acupuncture, tuina, and cupping are well-received by patients due to their minimal-trauma and low-side-effect nature. In family medicine services, providing these therapies can offer patients more diverse treatment options. For example, acupuncture can be used to treat various pain conditions, such as back pain, neck pain, and headaches. It stimulates specific acupoints to regulate the flow of qi and blood in the body, relieving pain without the use of drugs. Tuina, or Chinese massage, is effective in treating musculoskeletal disorders, such as sprains, strains, and joint stiffness. It can improve blood circulation, relieve muscle tension, and promote tissue repair. Cupping, which creates a negative pressure on the skin surface, can help relieve pain, reduce inflammation, and improve blood circulation in the local area. TCM also places great emphasis on doctor-patient communication. TCM practitioners believe that emotions have a significant impact on health. Family doctors, when communicating with patients, can draw on TCM's emotional theory, identify if a patient's health problems are related to excessive stress, anxiety, or anger, and provide psychological counseling and emotional support, thereby fostering a good doctor-patient relationship and enhancing the overall treatment effect (MacPherson et al., 2001; Tseng et al., 2018).

5. TCM Application Cases in Family Medicine

5.1 Case One: TCM Aids in Children's Digestive Health

In family medicine, TCM effectively tackles common childhood health problems. A family took their child, who had a long-standing loss of appetite and abdominal distension, to the family doctor. The TCM practitioner in the team first inquired about the child's diet and found a preference for high-fat, high-sugar foods and irregular eating habits. By observing the complexion and tongue coating, a weak spleen and stomach were diagnosed. The practitioner taught the parents home-based tuina techniques. After treatment, the child's appetite improved, and the abdominal distension disappeared. Additionally, the TCM practitioner gave detailed dietary advice to enhance the parents' understanding of children's health management (Liu & Chen, 2018).

5.2 Case Two: TCM Improves Elderly Hypertension Management

An elderly community patient with long-term hypertension still had frequent symptoms like dizziness, tinnitus, and poor sleep despite regular Western antihypertensive drugs. The family doctor team introduced TCM treatment. The TCM practitioner comprehensively assessed the patient, including daily habits, emotional state, tongue observation, and pulse-taking, and diagnosed liver-yang hyperactivity. A herbal formula to soothe the liver and suppress yang was prescribed, along with auricular acupoint pressing as an adjuvant. The family doctor recommended regular Baduanjin exercises. After months of treatment, the patient's blood pressure stabilized, symptoms lessened, and sleep improved, showing the value of TCM integration in enhancing elderly chronic patients' quality of life (Yang & Zhao, 2020).

6. Exploration of the Integration Model

6.1 Talent Training

Medical colleges and universities play a crucial role in cultivating future family doctors with TCM knowledge and skills. They should incorporate a series of TCM courses into the family medicine curricula, such as basic TCM theory, TCM diagnostics, Chinese materia medica, and acupuncture/tuina courses. They can adopt a combination of

theoretical teaching in the classroom and practical operation in clinical settings. For example, students are arranged to intern in TCM departments of hospitals or community health centers, where they can observe and participate in TCM diagnosis and treatment processes under the guidance of experienced TCM doctors. For practicing family doctors, TCM continuing education programs are essential. These programs can include short-term intensive training courses, academic lectures by renowned TCM experts, and clinical practice opportunities in TCM-rich environments. Some regions have organized on-the-job family doctors to participate in TCM appropriate technology training, which has been widely praised by patients (National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2024; National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2024; Zhang & Wang, 2019).

6.2 Service Model

Community health centers should take the lead in establishing integrated Chinese-Western medicine family doctor teams. These teams should consist of Western general practitioners, TCM doctors, and nurses, working together to provide comprehensive medical services for residents. When a patient visits, the team conducts a joint consultation. For example, for a patient with cervical spondylosis, the Western general practitioner first conducts a detailed physical examination and may order relevant imaging tests to accurately diagnose the condition. The TCM doctor then formulates a treatment plan using acupuncture, tuina, and Chinese herbal medicine. The nurse is responsible for guiding the patient in rehabilitation exercises and providing daily care advice. Leveraging Internet technology, online-offline integrated TCM health management services can be provided. A community health center can establish a WeChat official account, on which TCM health knowledge is regularly shared, and online consultation services are offered (Liu & Zhang, 2020; Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of the People's Republic of China, 2019; Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

6.3 Policy Support

Government policies play a vital role in promoting the integration of family medicine and TCM. In terms of medical insurance, eligible TCM services should be included in the scope of medical insurance reimbursement to increase their utilization. Many regions have already incorporated TCM service items such as acupuncture, tuina, and Chinese herbal medicine fumigation into the medical insurance reimbursement catalog. In terms of funding, local governments should allocate special funds for the construction of TCM facilities in community health centers and provide financial incentives for family doctors who incorporate TCM into their practice. In terms of regulatory policies, the government should simplify the approval process for TCM-related services and products in the primary healthcare setting. Some local governments have started piloting a unified review mechanism for TCM-related services in primary care, which promotes the overall development of the integration of family medicine and TCM (Wang & Li, 2021; Chen & Zhang, 2022).

Integrating family medicine and TCM is an innovative step that meets the needs of the times and the public's health. By combining their strengths, a more comprehensive, efficient, and patient-friendly primary healthcare system can be built, supporting universal health coverage and better national health. Future efforts should focus on further exploring and promoting this integration model for broader public benefit.

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