

Much in evidence

Nicola Robinson,
Professor of
Complementary
Medicine, talks
about the
importance of
research



Professor Nicola Robinson is head of the Centre for Complementary Healthcare and Integrated Medicine (CCHIM) at Thames Valley University (TVU), and Chair of the Research Council for Complementary Medicine (RCCM) and the British Acupuncture Council Research Committee. Visit www.health.tvu.ac.uk/chi/cam

Q When did you first take an interest in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)?

I completed my PhD in immunology in 1976. I applied to study medicine but at that time there were very few medical school places for women and I wasn't even offered an interview.

As a result of my doctorate I became interested in the epidemiological link between employees in the aniline dye industry and the occurrence of bladder cancer. I later became a research assistant coordinating a heart disease prevention project at St Mary's Hospital.

During a bad bout of flu my neighbour recommended I see a retired GP who had retrained as an acupuncturist. As a result of my treatment and our conversation, I trained in acupuncture, qualifying in 1982.

Q Your university has launched a website* for parents looking for evidence-based information on traditional and complementary approaches to health for their children. Why did you focus on this area?

This project was supported with a grant from the King's Fund to explore the range of treatments used by parents to treat their children. Many of these approaches had not been documented. London is multi-ethnic, with many parents using natural remedies, rituals and beliefs when treating or preventing ill health in their children. The project investigated the range of traditional approaches

being used, identified potential safety issues and passes this information on to parents and professionals using a website.

Q When you received the Winston Churchill fellowship, you went to China to explore educational and research initiatives in TCM. What impressed you most?

The degree of integration of conventional medicine and TCM, diagnostics, techniques, and treatments. Patients receive a range of person-centred care, individually determined and available in the same hospital at the same time.

Q What is the biggest obstacle to a more integrated approach to healthcare in the UK?

The current evidence base and cost.

Q You became chair of the Research Council for Complementary Medicine (RCCM) in 2008. What are its key objectives?

Our new strategy focuses on advancing the evidence base for complementary medicine. This should be accessible to all healthcare practitioners, government and the public. The RCCM continues working in partnership with NHS Evidence, helping to review CAM research.

We also want to ensure that research capacity among CAM practitioners increases and that they become more aware and interested in research. We hope to facilitate this through practice-based research with professional bodies.

We have also been identifying and mapping CAM research in terms of post-graduate activity in UK universities.

Q Why is research so important?

To increase the evidence base and ensure that the public, who are using a range of approaches, can access this information. It is equally important that CAM practitioners know how to interpret and critically appraise research.

Q Do you think there is a place for anecdotal/qualitative research that centres round case studies and self-reported measures?

Yes. Both the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) now take qualitative information into consideration. Qualitative data can guide practice and shape research hypotheses. It also captures non-specific details that may be missed with purely quantitative 'yes/no' type answers.

Q What advice would you give FHT members who want to get involved in research?

There are university courses for those who want to engage with formal academic training. Practitioners who are more 'hands on' might link into a research project by contacting their local university or key academics in the field. The best research ideas come from practice, so explain your ideas, or that you have a research hypothesis.

Q How do you maintain your own health and well-being?

I play tennis and badminton. I sing in a choir and I also make sure I have holidays away – not at home – otherwise I would look at my emails.

Q Do you have any regular CAM treatments?

I see an osteopath for my back.

Q Are you still an active practitioner?

Yes, but I only see people at weekends and in the evenings.

Q What's your favourite quote or saying?

It is from a Winston Churchill speech in 1940. I like it because I think it reflects where we are, particularly for Chinese medicine: 'Of this I am quite sure, that if we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future.'

*www.tvu.ac.uk/cchim/tca