

Institutional Legitimacy and Professional Boundary: Western Medicine-Trained Doctors' Attitudes and Behaviors toward Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract : The recent growing interest in and use of complementary and alternative medicine is a global phenomenon. In many regions, traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), an important type of complementary and alternative medicine, has been formally integrated into the healthcare system. Consequently, today's doctors face increasing requests and questions from patients regarding TCM. However, studies of TCM focus either on patients' approaches to TCM and Western medicine (WM) or on the politics involved in the institutionalization of TCM. To our knowledge, sociological studies on doctors' attitudes toward TCM are rare. This paper compares the receptivity of WM-trained Chinese doctors to TCM in Hong Kong and mainland China, in order to evaluate the interplay between professional training and dominant medical paradigms, on the one hand, and institutional legitimacy and government and client pressures to accept TCM, on the other. Based on survey and in-depth interviews with Western-medicine doctors in Hong Kong and mainland China, this research finds that: there is major difference between Western-medicine doctors' attitude toward traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in Hong Kong and mainland China. Doctors in Hong Kong are still suspicious toward TCM, no matter if they have exposure to TCM or not. Even some doctors who have much knowledge about TCM, such as got a diploma or certificate in TCM or tried TCM themselves, are still suspicious. This is because they hold up to the ideal of 'evidence-based medicine' and emphasize the kind of evidence based on randomized controlled trial (RCT). To Western medicine doctors in Hong Kong, this is the most reliable type of evidence for any medical practice, but it is lacking in TCM. This is the major reason why they do not trust TCM and would not refer patients to TCM in clinical practices. In contrast, western medicine doctors in mainland China also know about randomized controlled trial (RCT) and believe that's the most reliable evidence, but they tend to think experience-based evidence is also reliable. On this basis, they think TCM also has clinical effectiveness. Research findings reveal that legitimacy based on institutional arrangements is a relevant factor, but how doctors understand their professional boundaries also play an important role. Doctors in Hong Kong are more serious about a strict professional boundary between Western medicine and TCM because they benefited from it, such as a very prestigious status and high income. Doctors in mainland China tend to be flexible about professional boundaries because they never benefited from a well-defined strict professional boundary. This is related to a long history of the lack of professionalism in China but is also aggravated by the increasing state support of TCM.

Keywords : evidence-based decision-making, institutional legitimacy, professional behavior, traditional Chinese medicine

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