

# The Best of Both Worlds

*East meets West in integrative medicine. By Su Byron*

Steve Johns and Miriam Lacher are active 60-somethings who look at least a decade younger. The trim, attractive Miriam is a psychotherapist and manager at Sarasota Memorial Hospital's Bayside Center for Behavioral Health. Tall, muscular Steve is a machinist at Sun Hydraulics. Married for 13 years, they've always been proactive with their health. They've cut out salt and caffeine and added plenty of Omega-3 and fiber. They hit the gym three times a week, do their own yard work, and Steve plays a brisk game of golf. They see their doctor for regular check-ups. Actually, they see more than one doctor.

Along with their family physician, Miriam and Steve periodically visit Dr. Ruan Jin Zhao. He's another kind of health professional: a board-certified acupuncture physician and a specialist in herbal pharmacology. Traditional Chinese medicine (aka TCM) is Zhao's specialty. Ask Miriam and Steve and they'll tell you that Zhao's acupuncture treatments have corrected a host of maladies, including knee and shoulder injuries. They also helped save Steve's life.

A few months ago, Steve was receiving acupuncture therapy for a torn rotator cuff. As he always does, Zhao began the session with an examination. He listened to Steve's heart, measured his blood pressure, and observed his tongue.

What he saw worried him. Steve's heart sounded abnormal, and he had purple spots on his tongue—a possible indicator of heart disease in TCM. Zhao decided to refer Steve to a cardiologist.



Rebecca Baxter

**In the United States,** approximately 38 percent of adults and approximately 12 percent of children are using some form of complementary and alternative medicine.

**Complementary and alternative medicine** accounts for approximately 1.5 percent of total health care expenditures (\$2.2 trillion) and 11.2 percent of total out-of-pocket expenditures on health care in the United States. Source: National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine <http://nccam.nih.gov>

**Traditional Chinese medicine** has been chosen by the World Health Organization for worldwide propagation to meet the healthcare needs of the 21st century. Source: <http://library.thinkquest.org/24206/facts-stats.html>

## A WINNING COMBINATION

At his Sarasota office, Dr. Ruan Jin Zhao practices traditional Chinese medicine, but he encourages patients to use Western medical practices when needed.

After a battery of tests, the cardiologist diagnosed Steve with a 90-percent occlusion in a coronary artery. A few weeks later, Steve underwent successful endovascular stent surgery and has since fully recovered.

"Steve had no symptoms," says Miriam. "Dr. Zhao knew that testing was necessary to diagnose the problem he suspected, and that's where Western medicine played a role. If not for Dr. Zhao, though, we never would have known there was a cardiovascular problem to begin with."

Steve and Miriam are part of a growing trend—people who are fusing what's often called "complementary and alternative medicine," also known as CAM, with conventional Western medicine to stay healthy and



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treat disease. Traditional Chinese medicine is a large part of this movement.

As recently as 30 years ago, TCM practitioners and conventional physicians were often in opposition. But in recent decades, Chinese physicians began recognizing the value of both medical traditions. They pioneered a "whatever works" attitude. *If acupuncture works, use it. If a statin drug works, use that.* This approach is now a global phenomenon. Many conventional physicians have begun referring their patients to TCM specialists. TCM practitioners have returned the compliment.

Dr. Lixing Lao is the associate professor and director of Traditional Chinese Medicine Research at the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. "Acupuncture and other TCM modalities are relatively safe and effective for many disorders, such as chronic pain," says Lao. He's quick to add that these treatments may not be so effective for some conditions such as cancer and diabetes. "The combination of Chinese and Western treatments is more effective than either modality used separately," he says. "It's the best of both worlds."

Back in Sarasota, Zhao couldn't agree more. A trim and bright-eyed man in his mid-40s, Zhao is at the cutting edge of the fusion of Chinese and Western medical modalities. For more than a decade, he has maintained close relationships with area MDs. He is a scientific advisor at the H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center & Research Institute in Tampa for his pioneering work in an anti-viral herbal formula called Bing de Ling. (See next page 122.)

Zhao's credentials are impressive. After graduating from Henan College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in 1984, he earned his master's degree in medical science at the Beijing University of Traditional Chinese Medicine and Pharmacology. He began studying cellular biology and in 1990 earned his Ph.D in Chinese medicine and cellular biology. After teaching cellular biology at Beijing University of TCM & P, Zhao immigrated to the United States.

Today, as president of The Center for Traditional Chinese Medicine in Sarasota,

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## ABOUT BING DE LING

In 1996, Dr. Zhao teamed up with Tampa's H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center & Research Institute to investigate the properties of Bing De Ling, an anti-viral herbal formula he had been developing for years. The results of this and other Moffitt studies demonstrate that Bing De Ling increases the body's gamma interferon levels and can inhibit tumor cell proliferation in certain cancers.

"Bing De Ling works to boost the body's immune responses, resist viral infection and preserve homeostatic balance," says Zhao. He also uses the drug for patients who suffer from chronic fatigue, Lyme disease, fibromyalgia, lupus and various auto-immune diseases.

Zhao adds that Bing De Ling has been also been shown to alleviate the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation therapy, "thereby improving the chemotherapy performance."

Leah Vartanian can attest to Bing De Ling's efficacy when using it in tandem with chemotherapy and radiation. Diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005, the Sarasota resident underwent a lumpectomy, and followed that with chemotherapy and radiation therapy. During several months of treatment, she also received regular acupuncture treatments from Dr. Zhao—and took Bing de Ling twice a day for six months.

"The Bing De Ling and the acupuncture improved my stamina and helped my body heal faster," Vartanian says.



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Zhao embraces a philosophy that "promotes a beneficial fusion of Western and Chinese medicine." According to Zhao, TCM comprises a range of disciplines. "Traditional Chinese medicine is comprehensive," he explains. "TCM embraces etiology, pathology and pharmacology. It's a rigorous, whole system approach to diagnosis and treatment."

Zhao explains that TCM is more focused on what causes disease than the symptoms themselves. "When we treat a condition, we don't just treat the symptoms. We try to discover what is behind the symptoms," he says.

In the case of migraine or hypertension, for instance, Zhao will investigate diet and lifestyle and work closely with the patient to make changes that might help remedy the condition. For conditions that require herbal treatments, each remedy is formulated specifically for that individual patient.

Zhao also knows when to refer a patient to conventional medical practitioners. With patients with cardiovascular conditions or cancer, for instance, Zhao works directly with the patient's doctors and surgeons. For patients undergoing chemotherapy, Zhao says that acupuncture and herbal therapies can greatly relieve the discomfort and pain.

"I think only about the patient," says Zhao. "The question should never be: 'Should we use Chinese or Western medicine to heal this patient?' The question should always be: 'What's best for the patient?'" ■

## RESOURCES

**The Center for Traditional Chinese Medicine:** 3100 S. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota; (941) 365-8008; [chinesemedicalscience.com](http://chinesemedicalscience.com)

**The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM)** is the federal government's lead agency for scientific research on the diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine: [nccam.nih.gov/](http://nccam.nih.gov/)

**The Center for Integrative Medicine** at the University of Maryland School of Medicine: [compmed.umm.edu/](http://compmed.umm.edu/)

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