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INTERVIEW

ABC 702 SYDNEY – MORNING PROGRAM HOST, LINDA MOTTRAM
THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE DIRECTOR,
PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN

LINDA MOTTRAM: The University of Western Sydney has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, to set up a new research led Chinese medicine clinic.

This is a development; the agreement is going to allow the University of Western Sydney, the Penrith area, and Australia, generally, to gain access to what is a \$170 billion Chinese medicine industry.

Huge interest in alternative medicine in Australia, and in particular Chinese medicine.

And it's good to see that the research back up is going to be there, for it.

I've heard a lot of, you know, very, very, reputable medicos in this country increasingly coming around to some of the benefits, which are scientifically kind of justifiable, of Chinese medicine. So it's an interesting time.

Professor Alan Bensoussan is Director of the National Institute of Complementary Medicine, and he is on the line from Beijing this morning.

Professor, thank you for your time today.

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: Good morning Linda.

LINDA MOTTRAM: You must be pretty excited about signing this deal?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: It's thrilling, there's a, it really is a step forward, not just for the region and Australia, it's actually a step forward internationally, in terms of the translation of what's undertaken in some of the largest hospitals in the world but just hasn't been fully exposed to the West.

LINDA MOTTRAM: So in China, what they fully integrated Chinese medicine with more Western styles of medicine?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: Of course, much more so. Now, some hospitals of course are dedicated to Western medicine and others are dedicated to the integration. There is an extremely intensive effort in trying to validate more of the Chinese medicine, and better understand how to use them appropriately in the context of Western medicine as well.

LINDA MOTTRAM: So what are the question marks around it? Because when we talk alternative medicine, generally there are a lot of skeptics and for good reasons in many cases. In terms of Chinese medicine, what do we need to know that we don't already?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: The fundamental question of course is does it work and for whom, and how you integrate it into the care patterns, that the care practices, that we already have.

There are other issues as well around quality control of medicines, but quality control issues are issues that can be managed and dealt with.

I think the biggest challenges are understanding how effective a particular intervention is. What sort of patients they're most appropriate for and having a good insight into how the medicines actually work, and this is one of the big challenges of course for a complex form of intervention.

LINDA MOTTRAM: So all of those questions will be addressed by the new Institute will they?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: We hope so, it's a big, it's a tall order, and Chinese medicine is as big as all health intervention itself. It has been practiced for centuries, it's more than just herbal medicines, it's also acupuncture, and exercise therapy and diet therapy, and really it was the main-stay of treatment for centuries. So of course it stakes a claim around everything from you know, gout to cancer. I don't think we will be answering all those questions, but we will try to focus on some.

LINDA MOTTRAM: Presumably, some of those questions have been answered by others?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: Yes.

LINDA MOTTRAM: What do we know about, the effectiveness issue, how effective are they?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: There has been enormous progress in the last 20 years or so. I am sure you are familiar with the use of one of the Chinese herbs in managing resistant malaria. But even in our own work, we worked with access economics some years back to do a review of the science on the use of acupuncture for chronic non-specific back pain, and we confirmed results that were also previously confirmed in the UK by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence; and that is that acupuncture is one of the most cost effective treatments for chronic non-specific back pain. The literature also holds up fairly strongly around osteoarthritis, headaches, musculoskeletal pain. Sticking with acupuncture as well, we know some of the mechanistic science around it. We know that some of the hormones, the neurotransmitters that are released in the brain, actually affect emotion and pain. So, there is a better understanding of acupuncture, there's a hugely better understanding around the potential benefit of some herbs as well, and a range of conditions.

We took a group of oncologists over to China at the end of last year. This was after we had done some fairly detailed review of the literature and found more than two thousand clinical trials embedded in the Chinese literature, really quite strong clinical trials around the use of Chinese herbs and cancer. The oncologists we were with, we introduced them to three of the lead Chinese cancer hospitals in Beijing.

The level of dialogue and interest in terms of the capacity to pick up on some of the current interventions that are used to actually help chemotherapy and radiotherapy progress, help maintain patients on those

treatments, and to actually improve side effects, is, it was substantial, and this is what we are trying to bring back in terms of collaborations we are building up.

LINDA MOTTRAM: Professor Alan Bensoussan is with us, the Director of the National Institute of Complementary Medicine, as the University of Western Sydney signs a memo of understanding with Beijing University of Chinese Medicine, so we will have a new Chinese medicine research lead clinic, here in Sydney.

In 2012, I think it was, there was a board established, a national board, the Chinese Medical Board of Australia that was to try and address concerns about shoddy practitioners, and the making of claims that aren't scientifically proven. I assume you will be dove tailing with their work?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: The regulation of Chinese medicine practice was a really important step for Australia. As long as practice remains unregulated it is very difficult to be integrated into conventional care. As you've said Linda, it also means that standards of education are variable; the standards of clinical practice are variable.

Australia has actually been the vanguard in the world; we've actually led the Western world in terms of recognising that there is a need to standardised clinical practice in Chinese medicine in Australia.

If people are going to use it, lets make sure it works, lets make sure it's performed appropriately and people are well educated. That's what the national registration board is about.

What that means is that we have a good standard of practice, you know, a good standard of university education that allows practitioners to, you know, share the care of patients with other clinicians, doctors and specialists, and that is the very special nature of our situation in Australia, and I need to say that we are still the only Western nation that has actually taken that step. So we have become a real beacon for Chinese collaboration, the government in China is very well aware of our move forward in this regard.

LINDA MOTTRAM: What about the attitudes of Western medicine? I mean you said you took a group of oncologists to China. That's obviously, you know, you've broken through what might be some traditional barriers there, but are attitudes still a bit old-fashioned elsewhere? Maybe amongst GPs, and other areas of Western medicine?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: There are always practitioners that require a fair bit more convincing, and that's fair enough too. I think people need to see the evidence and know that the interventions work and understand better how they do work.

I've got no problem with that, but I do think it is important that people also don't put up barriers and blocks to treatments that, you know the exposure of some of these treatments to thousands of outpatients every day in public hospitals in China, performed by some of the most intelligent clinicians, you can't turn your back on it.

I think of the unfortunate thing that is still the case, is that most clinical specialists in Australia don't actually understand very much about Chinese medicine, and haven't actually investigated their own field adequately in that context. So I was thrilled that our oncology colleagues really wanted to step up to the plate and do it. I think, you know we have a number of colleagues in other areas, cardiovascular and diabetes and so forth that are willing to do the same, and that is what we are looking forward to doing.

LINDA MOTTRAM: Rosemary gave us a call; she is concerned about the use of animals in Chinese medicine, especially rare and endangered animals, is that still common?

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: No, not at all. It is actually illegal. Australia is a signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and it's maintained very strongly. Practitioners are not allowed to use those; it is just illegal trade, so they can be prosecuted if that is the case.

LINDA MOTTRAM: Yeah, okay well, it's an interesting time.

Congratulations on signing that agreement and we look forward to developments.

PROFESSOR ALAN BENSOUSSAN: Thanks so much Linda. Thank you.

LINDA MOTTRAM: Thanks for having us, bye bye.

Professor Alan Bensoussan is Director of the National Institute of Complementary Medicine; developments on that front.