

# TCVM has ‘little to do with science’

By Josh Loeb

THE World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) has been accused of including pseudoscientific content at its upcoming congress.

WSAVA congress, an annual event, is taking place in China this year and the scientific programme includes a stream on traditional Chinese veterinary medicine (TCVM).

There will be content on dog acupoints, moxibustion, herbology and the use of TCVM to treat cancers and multipathogen infections, as well as a ‘discussion on the viscera’.

Promotional material about the congress states that it will ‘feature its trademark high-quality evidence-based lectures on clinical and non-clinical topics’, adding that TCVM content will ‘run alongside’ this. However, in the scientific programme there is nothing to distinguish TCVM content from the rest of the clinical content.

In material publicising the event the WSAVA said it wants to ‘showcase the profound impact’ and ‘unveil the power’ of TCVM. This has prompted criticism of the association from several vets from around the world.

Manuel Magalhães Sant’Ana, a Portuguese vet and ethicist, has written to *Vet Record* suggesting that the decision to include TCVM content may be ‘driven by geopolitics’, with ‘little to do with science and ethics’ (see Letters, p 157). TCVM content has not been part of previous WSAVA congresses.

Sant’Ana told *Vet Record* the WSAVA was ‘perpetuating the myth of the validity of TCVM’, adding: ‘This completely discredits the rest of the congress programme. It also goes against the values of the WSAVA and poses a reputational risk to the veterinary profession.’

Brennan McKenzie, a small animal practitioner in the USA and author of the *SkeptVet* blog, which promotes science-based medical interventions, said TCVM encompassed ‘pre-scientific folk mysticism, based largely on Daoist cosmology and the

idea of balancing of opposites’. This, he said, was ‘remarkably similar to the humoral medicine of ancient Greece, where bloodletting, purging and suchlike were [seen as] ways of achieving balance’.

He added: ‘As an advocate for evidence-based medicine, I would say that all of this is unscientific and shouldn’t be a foundation for anything we do clinically. As to whether a particular herb with chemicals in it could have benefits for a particular medical problem if properly studied, sure [it could]. That’s where we get into confusion, because people will look for one small example of something that might have some benefits and act as though that validates TCVM, when it really has nothing to do with the overarching philosophy behind it all.’

UK-based vet Martin Whitehead, international director of the Evidence-Based Veterinary Medicine Association, said: ‘It is disappointing to see the WSAVA appearing to endorse TCVM, the practice of which is largely based on pseudoscience and superstition.’

David Ramey, an equine vet in the USA who has researched ancient Chinese equine medicine, acknowledged that many proponents of TCVM sincerely believed that what they were doing helped animals. But he said this belief was misguided. He also said TCVM had been promoted by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party.

Ramey said: ‘The emperor’s got no clothes, but nobody wants to stand up and say that because they want to be “collegial” and “open minded” – but open minded to what?’

He added: ‘A wound heals the same in China as it does in Canada or the



Moxibustion is a form of Chinese therapy that entails the burning of mugwort leaves. It is believed to enhance healing with acupuncture

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UK. Herbs, when they do have effects, that’s not because they’re from China, it’s because the plant has a bioactive ingredient in it.’

Responding to criticism of the inclusion of TCVM content, WSAVA executive director Richard Casey said: ‘The lectures in question have been designed by our local Chinese veterinary associations, a benefit that every host country has had at WSAVA congresses for many years. This year, the TCVM stream features speakers from across Asia and wider afield. Given the deep history and cultural significance of traditional approaches to veterinary medicine, not just within China but across Asia, and considering the large number of attendees from this region, we believe it is fair and justified for this content to be included.’

Casey said all content at WSAVA congresses was ‘intended to stimulate thought and discussion, and is not necessarily an endorsement of the scientific validity of the treatments’.

He added: ‘As with every WSAVA event, participants are encouraged to ask fair, appropriate and collegial questions constructively. We aim to create an environment where open dialogue and respectful debate are welcomed, allowing for a robust exchange of ideas and perspectives.’ ●