

**Proposal for an
International Tibetan Medical Research Association at Oxford**

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Tibetan medicine was developed in Tibet and spread throughout the various Tibetan speaking areas of the Himalayas. Incorporating certain elements of Indian and Chinese medicine, it matured into a unique comprehensive system on the Tibetan high plateau, where many centuries of relative geographic isolation supported its continuous development and preservation. Until the mid-20th century, Tibetan medicine served as the sole health care system for the Tibetan population.

This situation changed radically after the incorporation of Tibet into China in 1951, when a new social and political system was gradually instituted on the Tibetan plateau. In addition to a disruption of traditional knowledge systems in general, the situation is further complicated by the fact that Tibetans nowadays are scattered in different parts of the world and do not have access to the same resources of information and communication. On the Tibetan plateau itself too, no mechanism is in place whereby medical developments in one region can be communicated to another, and medical knowledge is highly variable within each region. In order to preserve the ancient medical knowledge of Tibet, an effort is required to standardize the medical terminology, in particular for the diagnostic system and the identification of medical plants, to enhance communication across the regions, and to combine traditional methods with contemporary research and technologies.

It is my intention to establish an International Tibetan Medical Research Association, based at Oxford, as an international forum for research on traditional Tibetan medicine and for the dissemination of traditional medical knowledge.

Within this framework, I propose research groups in the following areas:

a. Research on Tibetan medical education

This project is related to my current research on “Textual initiation in Tibetan medical education” funded by the Wellcome Trust. It aims to evaluate traditional teaching methods in comparison with modern forms of medical training. The traditional Tibetan model aims at a medical education that goes beyond the enhancement of individual intellectual understanding to a more holistic development of the individual, integrating intellectual knowledge with other human qualities such as personal maturity and empathy. I hope that the insights gained will be used by policy makers in shaping contemporary Tibetan medical education.

b. Preventive medicine and health promotion in rural Tibet

Most of the health information available in the Tibetan speaking areas of contemporary China is written in Chinese. This is an enormous obstacle for its dissemination, since many Tibetans in rural areas don't read Chinese. Moreover, despite the fact that Tibetan medical works contain instructions

for health care, these important resources have never been properly studied and applied in the contemporary public health domain. In order to bring the maximum benefit to local communities, Tibetan health care and its culturally shaped approach to diseases and healing needs to be integrated into the current public health care systems. Based on the results of my doctoral research, I would like to implement University based teams in different Tibetan regions that can jointly develop health educational material in Tibetan, combining the most useful approaches of traditional medicine and methods developed in Western public health. It will be crucial for the success of the project to involve stakeholders from different fields. Therefore impact workshops will be organised in the second and fourth year of the project, the first to discuss implementation strategies, the second to review the success of these strategies.

c. Methodologies for a clinical trial of Tibetan medicine

This research group will consider appropriate ways to apply modern clinical research methods to Tibetan medicine. Based on the results of two previous international clinical trials I was involved in, the group will try to establish adequate methods of evaluating the efficacy of traditional Tibetan medical drugs and treatments. It is hoped that this will help to clarify the status of Tibetan medicine on an international level.

d. A standardized terminology of Tibetan medical terms

This research group will collect Tibetan medical terms used in different areas and compare them against the “classics” of Tibetan medicine. The outcome will be a standardized glossary in Tibetan, Chinese and English. This will help to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and it will enable doctors and researchers from around the globe to communicate their medical knowledge more easily.