

Cutting-edge genetics circles back to traditional medicine, says expert

Erin Ellis, Vancouver Sun 09.24.2015



Traditional Chinese medicine has, for thousands of years, been trying to tailor medicine to the individual, rather than the average person. File photo.

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Genetic tests are putting advanced scientific techniques to work solving an ancient question, says an expert in alternative medicine: how does human uniqueness affect a person's health.

Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine have studied the topic for millennia, says Jeffrey Bland, an author based in Washington state where he founded the non-profit Personalized Lifestyle Medicine Institute. He'll be speaking at the Dr. Rogers Prize Colloquium at the Vancouver Convention Centre on Saturday, which is open to the public.

"If you examine the traditional Chinese medicine model — which in its 2,500- to 3,000-year history didn't have access to genetic information — it has an extraordinarily robust series of observations as to how people's lifestyle influenced their function," Bland said in a recent phone interview.

"It ultimately defined a very descriptive way of doing what we now do much more precisely with Western genomics: Asking how the genetic potential of a human being is influenced by their lifestyle, diet, environment, activity and stress in such a way to produce health or disease."

Bland is also the keynote speaker at a Friday night gala when the winner of the \$250,000 Dr. Rogers Prize for achievement in complementary and alternative medicine will be announced. The award is named for the late Dr. Roger Hayward Rogers, a Vancouver physician who co-founded the Centre for Integrated Healing in Vancouver, now known as InspireHealth.

Awarded every two years since its inception in 2007, it's the richest award of its kind in North America.

Bland believes the cost of sequencing a person's complete genetic code — their "book of life" — will continue to fall to the point that it will become a regular part of diagnostic testing. And since certain genetic predispositions can be activated by outside forces such as pollutants, the next wave of research will focus on how genetic variations manifest themselves in health effects like allergies or adverse drug reactions.

"We're starting to move from medicine of the average to medicine of the individual by the nature of these tools, which is really what Chinese medicine has been trying to do for thousands of years."

Bland agrees that most people haven't taken the very first steps toward improving their health by exercising regularly and getting rid of processed foods in their diet, but says knowing more about their individual makeup may change their approach. Much in the same way that no one knew their blood cholesterol 40 years ago, a quick, cheap test for cholesterol revolutionized the prevention of heart disease, he notes.

"Once a person has access to understanding their genetic book of life, it introduces them to a genetic history in a different way. It's an 'aha!' moment ... a strong motivator to start being more interested in your own health from a strength and weakness perspective."

This year's colloquium theme is Traditional Chinese Medicine & the Microbiome: A Modern Context for an Ancient Practice. Other speakers are:

- Dr. Joseph Sung, president of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, a supporter of integration between Western and Chinese medicine.

- Dr. Robert Rountree, the 2015 Linus Pauling Award Winner and medical director of Boulder Wellcare in Boulder, Colo. He studies the role of the microbiome — the myriad bacteria living within the human body — in chronic disease.

To register for the free event, which has limited seating, go to www.drrogersprize.org