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A journal of traditional Chinese medicine

An interview with Giovanni Maciocia



By Ray Ford

Giovanni Maciocia is an internationally recognised writer, teacher, and practitioner, who is well-known to our profession in Australia. His books are still used by many schools of Chinese medicine as the standard text for students worldwide. His books are also used comprehensively by practitioners as references in their practice in most Western countries. Giovanni has made an enormous contribution to the profession of Chinese medicine in the West and is still practising in the United Kingdom after 30 years in the profession. While I was on a recent trip to the UK in January 2003, Giovanni kindly agreed to be interviewed about his thoughts on different aspects of Chinese medicine, in particular acupuncture. What follows is an abstract of that interview which may be of interest to members of our profession here in Australia, given the depth of knowledge and experience that Giovanni has.

RAY: What is the current state of affairs within the United Kingdom acupuncture profession?

GIOVANNI: For about the past six years we have had only one association and register in the United Kingdom. The profession has not been legally regulated, so at the moment anyone can practise acupuncture even if they are not a member of the association as practitioners don't have to legally be a member. Our profession is rapidly moving towards legalisation, the association is working towards that. I think that in a few years the acupuncture profession here will be legally recognised like the osteopaths are now, so that it will be illegal to practise acupuncture without being a member of the association.

RAY: Are there a lot of people with limited training practicing acupuncture in the UK now?

GIOVANNI: At the moment there are people practising with very little training; many are medical doctors. Acupuncture has become extremely popular even in small country towns where it seems that half the GPs do acupuncture. I once gave a lecture in a hospital near here and I was amazed how many GPs did practise acupuncture.

RAY: Was your lecture well received?

GIOVANNI: Yes, very well received, they were friendly but some of them had studied acupuncture for just a few weekends. To give them credit, they knew their training was very inadequate, they were willing to learn more, to study more, due to their interest in Chinese medicine and they were not getting any financial benefit from it.

RAY: Do you think it is of value for them to be offered better training?

GIOVANNI: Some purists are against it, they might say that doctors should study as long as we do and I understand their point of view, but it's a fact that doctors will practise acupuncture whether we like it or not. Wouldn't it be better to encourage them to study more, to train them more, rather than asking them to do a full-time four-year course, which of course they never will? How could they with their workload?

RAY: Do you think there should be a minimum level of training before they practise on people?

GIOVANNI: Definitely!

RAY: What sort of length?

GIOVANNI: I am not really sure but I would say, at the very minimum, 200 hours of training. Interestingly here in the UK there is

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the Medical Acupuncture Association, which is teaching medical doctors what they call modern acupuncture — scientific acupuncture. There is a gap in the training available, between that limited scientific training and our full time four-year course. Our profession could fill that gap. It seems logical to me to teach medical doctors traditional acupuncture but in a more concentrated and faster way than the way we are taught. Doctors will practise anyway so let us help them to be better than they are right now by providing better training. In the interests of the patients, it would be better if those GPs learnt more about traditional acupuncture.

RAY: Maybe with their clinical experience doctors will learn quickly.

GIOVANNI: I agree — many doctors already have considerable clinical experience. A medical doctor when told of the symptoms of Kidney yang deficiency, for example, will find that it will resonate with their clinical experience. On the other hand, some doctors might find it hard to make the transition from a Western to a Chinese clinical thinking.

RAY: What do you think about the scientific evaluation of acupuncture?

GIOVANNI: The very nature of acupuncture is such that it is very difficult to conduct proper studies. In my opinion, acupuncture really is an art, not a science.

RAY: Do you think these studies should continue?

GIOVANNI: Yes, definitely.

RAY: It is hard to replicate an art?

GIOVANNI: That's right, the patient is never the same from one day to the next and neither is the practitioner. Acupuncture as an art relies on the practitioner's skill, so how can you standardise or replicate it? I don't think you can even do that in Western medicine.

RAY: Ted Kaptchuk is investigating this whole question of scientific evaluation and the placebo effect at the moment.

GIOVANNI: Ted Kaptchuk has been studying this for the past five years; he has pointed out that what we think are highly scientific studies into Western medicines are in fact open to debate. The whole question of placebo can be debated and questioned. In my opinion, it is difficult to have a scientific type of study that will evaluate acupuncture properly because of its very nature. We should constantly hammer the point home to those carrying out the studies into Chinese medicine that our medicine is different and therefore a different approach is needed that

takes this into account.

RAY: Do you think the studies carried out so far are of value to the profession?

GIOVANNI: Yes, many of them are. I have seen some bad studies done. The most essential question in any study is what is being tested? In most studies what is being tested is not really Chinese medicine; the answer is useless because the question is useless. I have seen studies that investigate the use of acupuncture to counteract the side effects of a drug, but why should acupuncture counteract the side effect of a drug? Why should it? That is not how it evolved in China, to counteract the effect of a chemical. Even if it doesn't do it — so what?

RAY: I think an example of this are the studies that show that acupuncture is no better than placebo to stop people smoking cigarettes.

GIOVANNI: Yes, so why should acupuncture stop someone smoking? That is not what it's for — these studies get poor answers because the question is wrong. I read the result of a study done in England on the use of acupuncture to stop people smoking cigarettes; the conclusion was that it was no better than placebo. By a strange coincidence, the day after I read that, I had a patient who came to me to stop smoking and he stopped in one treatment. I then thought: well, what's the point of that study? Should I then stop treating people to stop smoking because the study has told me that it doesn't work. If so, why did this patient stop?

RAY: A researcher might say that it was placebo, not Chinese medicine.

GIOVANNI: My opinion is that you can't eliminate placebo from medicine; this is the main thing that I think that we should hammer home in our profession. These studies are trying to eliminate the placebo effect from the real effect, but the placebo effect is medicine because what is being called the placebo effect to me is healing. That is true for Western medicine as well.

RAY: In what way do you mean?

GIOVANNI: If a medical doctor administers a steroid, for example, then the steroid will have a placebo effect — it is impossible to eliminate placebo from medicine because that is what medicine is all about, in my opinion. I took part in a study many years ago in England for the treatment of old people who had asthma. There was a group who were having sham acupuncture and their asthma improved. They improved because they were coming to the hospital being looked after by nurses and two acupuncturists and there was a healing atmosphere. They got better.

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RAY: A recent study actually showed that massage was more effective for back pain than acupuncture; Ted Kaptchuk was involved in that study.

GIOVANNI: Well, I think that study should be questioned. I have been studying and practising acupuncture for 30 years and in that time one of the most striking things that I have noticed is how effective acupuncture is for back pain. Would that mean after reading that study I should stop treating people with back pain? I think the results for back pain with acupuncture are so good — even better than apparently simpler things like tennis elbow or arthritis of the shoulder.

RAY: What do you think about Japanese style tube needling compared to Chinese style needle techniques?

GIOVANNI: I don't practise Japanese acupuncture but I do know a little bit about it. Personally I don't like tube needling because you lose contact with the needle and for me it's very important to have that contact with the needle because the *deqi* sensation is not only from the patient but also from the practitioner. I think that is lost when using the guide tube. I am open to different styles of acupuncture; Chinese medicine has many different traditions. I think that “so-called” TCM acupuncture could have something to learn from Japanese acupuncture, particularly in their attention to palpation diagnosis, which has been forgotten in Chinese acupuncture. I think that Japanese style acupuncture has a lot to offer but I personally prefer Chinese style acupuncture and that's what I have been practising throughout my career.

RAY: What do you mean by “so called” TCM?

GIOVANNI: I always say “so-called TCM” because I don't think there is such a thing as TCM, but that is a very long subject and discussion. Many people would say that I practise TCM but to me that doesn't mean anything. What is TCM and how do you define it? Is it the acupuncture that is done in China? If that is the definition of TCM I certainly don't work like a Chinese acupuncturist in China. We all work differently here, so I really think it is just a label some give to others.

RAY: If they look at your *Foundations of Chinese Medicine* book they will see things like “LU 7 for relationship break-ups” from your personal experience. I don't think that is strictly TCM.

GIOVANNI: That is an example of what I am trying to do, trying to keep my feet on the ground, to learn Chinese medicine as much as possible and fill in all those gaps.

RAY: Is Chinese medicine very popular throughout Europe?

GIOVANNI: Oh yes, more in Western Europe. I don't know much about Eastern Europe although I do have some contacts in Eastern Europe. I am told by people who live in those countries that Chinese medicine is much less developed there. In Western Europe it is almost mainstream medicine.

RAY: Is TCM the dominant style?

GIOVANNI: There has been a shift in Europe in the past 10 years. Acupuncture in Continental Europe excluding the UK was totally dominated by French style acupuncture, influenced by practitioners like Van Nghi and Chamfrault. There has been a definite shift in the past 10 years to so-called TCM. I know some schools in Italy, for example, that have made that shift — I am partly responsible for that as my books were translated into Italian. There are other reasons, too: so-called TCM acupuncture based on the syndromes really resonates with medical doctors with clinical experience.

RAY: What do you think about the translation of five elements as five phases which is in common use now?

GIOVANNI: As I have said in my *Foundations* book I do not think that five elements is a good translation of *wu xing*, but I do not think that five phases is any better so I can't see the point of changing to five phases. For a start there would be four phases not five, because the fifth phase is in the centre and is not a phase, so that is the first thing that doesn't fit. Secondly the five elements are five qualities of nature; in my opinion, five states of nature. *Xing* does mean movement but not in the sense of walking from one place to the next, rather in the sense of changes in matter. For example, water is a movement downward, fire upward, wood is an expansive movement, metal is a contractive movement and earth is actually no movement because it is in the centre. So *xing* really means movement in the sense of ‘states of matter’, which would coincide with the five qualities of nature. In fact, in ancient times the name *wu xing* was not always used; it was also called the five abilities and the five qualities of nature — the fluid quality, the fire quality, the solidity of metal, the wood malleability. This really has to do with chemistry — five chemical states of nature.

RAY: What is your opinion about “adapting” Chinese medicine, in particular acupuncture, for Western patients?

GIOVANNI: It is an ongoing debate. Some people in the West practise acupuncture in

a way that has never been done in Chinese medicine. Some people stress very much adapting Chinese medicine to the West — for example, Ted Kaptchuk really believes that we must do that. I agree with Steve Clavey who states in his revised Fluid Physiology book that it may be premature to talk about adapting Chinese medicine as so much of the Chinese texts remain untranslated, we have such huge gaps in our knowledge, but at the same time I don't think we need to wait 30 or 40 years before we start thinking about adapting it. For example, some styles of acupuncturists do not know the divergent or *luo* channels at all. If an acupuncturist doesn't know the divergent channels or the *luo* channels, which are so basic, then to talk about adapting something that they don't know or understand fully does seem premature.

RAY: It may be a long time before we have the information to fill in all the gaps.

GIOVANNI: I think that is true, if we wait to fill in all the gaps before adapting it, that will be a bit too long; there is a middle way. On the one hand we should learn as much as possible, fill in the gaps, while on the other hand I think we should cautiously adapt it to Western patients at the same time, always keeping our feet on the ground. Personally I have tried to tread a middle ground, a middle way.

RAY: What do you see as acupuncture's strengths and weaknesses?

GIOVANNI: I think acupuncture can treat most things; the first thing that springs to mind that it cannot treat is cancer. There is a debate in some areas whether or not you can make it spread with acupuncture. Some people don't do acupuncture on cancer patients. I do not think it's that good for skin diseases, but apart from that I think it can treat most things that herbal medicine can. I would never treat a cancer patient with acupuncture by itself. I believe that herbal medicine can do better with these patients.

RAY: How has your view of acupuncture changed over the years?

GIOVANNI: My view has changed a bit. I now see the meridians not as lines in a vacuum, as they have been represented over the years, where you connect the dots! I see them as areas that together cover the whole body. I have also given more importance to other structures of the body which are not mentioned much, such as the *Huang* membranes and the *Gao*.

RAY: These are Chinese terms for the connective tissue?

GIOVANNI: That's right.

RAY: What advice would you give to anyone in our profession, to help them to obtain a high level of skill and knowledge?

GIOVANNI: My main advice would be what Dr Shen always said: "ask yourself why, why, why". The essence of Chinese medicine in my opinion is diagnosis. What Chinese medicine boils down to, ultimately, is that you are in a room with a patient — just the two of you — and there is this therapeutic meeting and you have to diagnose and treat the patient accordingly. Everything else is irrelevant; the human contact with the patient and diagnosis is everything. Marketing efforts are not so important, nor do we have to follow the way medical doctors practise. By diagnosis I mean we should pay attention to everything — don't discard anything. If the pulse doesn't fit, always ask yourself "Why?" over and over again. Learn from observation, as every patient is a teacher. People complain about not having enough practise but there is a lot we can learn by questioning ourselves and observing, paying attention to all symptoms, signs, the pulse and tongue. I learnt most of the pulse diagnosis myself by constantly observing and comparing it to other observations and storing that experience.

RAY: After achieving so much, what inspires you now?

GIOVANNI: Chinese medicine is still so fascinating to me; it is almost a religious experience to treat someone. You are in a room with someone who actually surrenders themselves to you for you to treat them. Many of them are prepared to confide their deepest emotions to you! It is tremendously interesting, and I get a lot of satisfaction out of it.

RAY: Do you still work very long hours?

GIOVANNI: I work very hard, but I don't over work. I watch my diet, I exercise and get enough rest, and I have reduced my workload in recent years. I used to work much harder when I was younger but I have never been "burnt out". I recently had a thorough health check; this revealed that I am in excellent health.

RAY: Thank you very much for your time, Giovanni.

GIOVANNI: You are most welcome.

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