

GRASSROOTS MEDICINE



ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST DIVERSE PATHOLOGISTS, DR STEPHEN LI'S REAL PASSION IS THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC HEALTH PATHOLOGY, A RADICAL IDEA THAT MAY REDEFINE THE FUTURE OF THE PROFESSION, WRITES JUSTINE COSTIGAN.

PHOTOGRAPHER: PAUL JONES

Dr Li imagines a future where an International College of Pathologists is established to facilitate the global exchange of information and a time when pathology organisations service people from all over the world.

To Sydney's Chinese community, Dr Stephen Li is something of a celebrity. The voice of two weekly radio programs on the China Radio Network and Australian Chinese Radio, Dr Li has been bringing the latest medical information to the Chinese community since 1997.

An unpaid position that takes up most of Saturday afternoon each week, Dr Li's radio programs are only the tip of an iceberg of extracurricular activities. In addition to his full time role as director of core pathology at the ICPMR (Institute of Clinical Pathology and Medical Research) at Sydney's Westmead Hospital, Dr Li spends around 15 hours a week outside normal working hours dedicated to a range of extra projects. Among the long and impressive list includes writing a weekly column for one of the Australia's largest Chinese language newspaper, Australian Chinese Daily, various charitable commitments, board appointments and committees, and an ongoing involvement with the Chinese community health network, to name just a few.

With so many bows to his arrow Dr Li is conscious that he may be perceived as unfocussed but he is quick to point out that everything he does is part of a bigger picture, part of his 'vision' for a new public health care concept he calls 'Public Health Pathology'.

Dr Li says it's estimated that more than 80 per cent of patients visit their doctors because of chronic diseases and, "while western medicine is good at treating and curing acute illnesses," he says, "the treatment of chronic disease has become more about prevention than treatment."

"An important characteristic of chronic diseases is that they are the consequences of many years of "minor damages" to the body so that the onset of most of them is preventable. However, in order to do this you have to tell the patients (or potential patients) some 10 or 20 years earlier. In other words, the best way to manage chronic diseases, which make up the majority of sufferings today, is to put more emphasis on early disease detection and disease prevention."

The concept of Public Health Pathology is to prevent chronic disease through public health programs and help people successfully manage their own health.

Dr Li believes pathologists have a key role to play in this process, particularly in the area of disease prevention. "If we look closer to the laboratory inventory, there are increasingly more and more pathology tests for 'predicting' diseases," he says.

However, Dr Li believes pathologists' need to extend their role outside the lab if the profession is to survive. Dr Li sees disseminating information, using new technologies and thinking globally as the way to place pathology back firmly in the core of health care services and turn around the creeping perception among some bureaucrats that pathology is an auxiliary health care service, like linen and catering.

In fact he imagines a future where an International College of Pathologists is established to facilitate the global exchange of information and a time when pathology organisations service people from all over the world.

If it sounds like a brave new world of medicine, it's not. In fact it's already happening and Dr Li is keen to point out that he has already worked on several successful Public Health Pathology projects. Among these include a joint public health program with the Sydney-West and Sydney-Southwest area health services to support families with a genetic history of cardiovascular disease and all the after hours work he does teaching everyday people, such as his radio show audience, about preventing illness. Other activities, such as support for related public health projects such as vaccination, diabetes awareness and Quit smoking campaigns are all part of his Public Health Pathology communication strategy. It's a passion that he is clearly prepared to devote his working life to.

Yet Dr Li could not be more modest about his achievements, quickly deflecting praise to those he feels are more deserving. "I am a 'public health



Dr Li in the studios of the 2CR China Radio Network.

pathology' advocate," he says, "but not a pioneer in Public Health Pathology. Pathologist and physician Professor Cres Eastman is a true pioneer who has benefited hundreds of millions of people worldwide by carrying out international public health projects."

One colleague, Dr Victor Poulos, the principal Hospital Scientist at the Royal Prince Alfred in Sydney, enthusiastically describes Dr Li as a genius. "He's very softly spoken but he gets things done. He has a wonderfully collaborative approach, it's hard to fault him."

Despite his success and regard within the profession you can't help feeling that Dr Li would be uncomfortable hearing these compliments. His first priority and greatest interest are the people he helps and he is justifiably proud of the assistance he has given to the Chinese community. "In the Chinese culture doctors have very high status so Chinese are not likely to ask questions of their doctor. Through the radio program and my column they've had a forum to learn more about their own health and they responded with lots of questions about even the most basic health care issues. It made me realise just how much work needed to be done." 🔥