

Editorial

Daniel Maxwell

 As I sit here in my clinic with workmen banging and buzzing in the studio upstairs, I find myself pondering the words of a scientist on the radio this morning who introduced listeners to the concept of 'signal to noise ratio' (a metric that distinguishes the level of a signal from the surrounding background noise). It got me thinking about the amount of 'noise' we have to deal with in our profession.

In the clinic - and boisterous workmen notwithstanding - all kinds of 'noise' comes at us from the moment a patient walks in. Presuming our sense organs are functioning normally, there is plenty of 'signal' to perceive at this point - the patient's demeanour, smell and complexion for example. However, these are frequently drowned out by perfume, makeup, the patient's 'game face', and so on. Once the patient sits down and the variable of speech comes into play, the amount of potential 'noise' increases exponentially. For instance, patients often volunteer what they think is important - in the last few weeks patients have told me about blood test results, what the kinesiologist thinks, psychic readings, what their functional medicine doctor said, what the GP thinks - even what the Akashic record says about their problems. Not to discount any of this information out of hand, but it takes a discerning clinical mindset to extract a Chinese medical signal from such noise.

Let us turn away from the clinic to look at communication with our peers - an essential part of professional development throughout the history of Chinese medicine. Doctors have always published their findings, for the good of patients and peers, and of course for fame and honour. Back in the day, information would be painstakingly carved onto bamboo or silk - you had to be damn sure you had something worth saying to go to the bother. Even 50 years ago, you would need to publish through a journal or share at a conference, in which case your opinions would be checked and vetted by an editor and/or peers. So perhaps history has some 'noise-filtering' effect in which a good signal earns its longevity. In today's Information Age of course, any Tom, Dick or Harry with an opinion about Chinese

medicine can put them out there ... which means a whole lot more noise. Ask a clinical question on an acupuncture *Facebook* forum, and you can well expect advice on kinesiology, vitamins, functional medicine, homeopathy, chakras - sometimes everything apart from solid methods from our own paradigm. And there is a huge market for flakey Orientalist flimflam. Just recently on the UK TV show *Dragons Den* all four canny multi-millionaires were seduced to invest in a start-up that mails out ear seeds for patients to self-treat their chronic fatigue syndrome. For those of us at the coal face treating such conditions in clinic, such an idea is preposterous and does authentic Chinese medicine a grave disservice in the public domain. But amongst the uninitiated, who is to know what is precious signal and what is confused noise? Misconception and mythery similarly abound in the Chinese internal martial arts, although those taken in by delusory notions in this field tend to learn the hard way that their beliefs do not match reality.

Many trust that the scientific research method will save us from this Tower of Babel of noise and confusion. It is an attractive idea, and of course rigorous research is required for Chinese medicine to hold its own on the far-from-level playing field alongside biomedicine. But does applying 'evidence-based' protocols from research papers give good clinical results? Or does this constitute yet more noise that further drowns out the oh-so-quiet signal from the patient's *qi* in front of us in clinic? Others hope that artificial intelligence will cut through the din and make our job as physicians easier; judging by the subtly grotesque images AI produces and the howlers that intersperse its writing, we ain't there yet.

One way to deal with the unfavourable signal to noise ratio is to consume information that has been curated, reviewed, checked, worked and polished. Material that has been put through a filter to clean up the signal - a kind of high definition quality control. On that clear, sonorous, aspirational note, may I present your

June issue of the *Journal of Chinese Medicine*... 

