Research Topic:

Under the subject area of Knowledge and Inquiry, empiricism forms a major topic of discussion and will be studied in this paper. More specifically, this research paper will focus on empiricism in medicine, since medicine is an area of knowledge that relies heavily on empirical methods such as clinical trials and observation of disease symptoms. Evidence-based medicine (EBM), which is considered as the strictest form of an empiricist approach used in medicine today, will be the specific focus of this research paper. This essay seeks to compare the application of the EBM approach in Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine.

Rationale for Choice of Research Topic:

In recent decades there has been an exponential increase in the availability and use of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in the Western world, much of it driven by consumer demand. Factors such as the costs of contemporary Western medicine and the ineffectiveness of Western medicine in treating chronic illness have caused more and more people to turn to alternative medical treatments, including TCM.

Accompanying the rise of TCM has been a call from within Western medicine for more evidence of the efficacy of its treatments. Western medicine relies on science-based research characterized by well-designed and controlled clinical trials to determine the effectiveness of a particular treatment for a specific condition. This approach is otherwise known as evidence-based medicine (EBM). As it has adopted EBM as the primary arbiter of medical knowledge, Western medicine has also begun to demand that TCM be subjected to the same types of controlled clinical trials as evidence of its efficacy. However, the call for an evidence-based TCM has been met with objections by Chinese medicine practitioners, who contend that TCM cannot be fairly evaluated using the epistemic framework of Western medicine.

This paper thus seeks to examine the suitability of the EBM approach in traditional Chinese medicine, by comparing the nature of knowledge in TCM to that of Western medicine. Existing discussion on EBM has largely focused on the implications of an evidence-based approach for complementary and alternative medicine in general, which encompasses TCM, naturopathy, Ayurveda, and a range of other therapies. As such, this paper aims to focus on TCM specifically, in order to achieve a more in-depth analysis of the implications of EBM approach in traditional Chinese medicine. Through doing so it hopes to contribute to our understanding of the construction of medical knowledge in both Western medicine and TCM.

Proposed Title of Research Essay:

Evidence-based biomedicine and its implications on traditional Chinese medicine.
Synopsis of Research Essay:

Objectives:
1) To find out how knowledge in Western medicine is constructed according to evidence-based epistemology;
2) To examine the need for evidence in traditional Chinese medicine;
3) To examine the suitability of the evidence-based approach in traditional Chinese medicine.

Scope:
This paper will discuss the suitability of the evidence-based approach in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), with respect to the randomized controlled trials (RCTs) used in clinical research. This is because RCTs form the main aspect of evidence-based medicine, since statistical evidence derived from RCTs is currently considered as the highest-quality scientific evidence according to evidence-based epistemology. Therefore, this paper will discuss specifically on whether it is appropriate to apply the RCT method on traditional Chinese medicine. However, this paper does not seek to propose an alternative methodology for assessing TCM because it would require further study into the medical practice and research design.

Literature Review:
From a review of literature, there exists a lively debate on whether complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)—which encompasses all healthcare practices that are not generally considered as part of conventional Western medicine—should be assessed according to the standards of evidence-based epistemology. Proponents of the evidence-based approach argue that EBM standards should be applied to alternative medicine so as to establish a more objective basis for its therapeutic efficacy and safety. However, several epistemological, methodological and strategic issues have been raised regarding the incorporation of EBM standards into alternative medicine. The authors of the journal article “Why Alternative Medicine Cannot Be Evidence-based” have pointed out that the call for an evidence-based CAM is problematic because it assumes that the evidence-based epistemic framework generates the best evidence regardless of the underlying theory of disease and healing. Such position is challenged by the authors in the article.

Books/journal articles relevant to this study include:
- “Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge” by Charles Leslie and Allan Young (1992)
- “Applying Evidence-Based Medicine to Traditional Chinese Medicine: Debate and Strategy” by Jeanne L. Shea (Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 2006)
- “Why Alternative Medicine Cannot Be Evidence-based” by Mark R. Tonelli and Timothy C. Callahan (Academic Medicine, 2001)

Having reviewed the existing literature, I feel that there is potential for further research focusing on epistemological issues involved in incorporating the standards of EBM into traditional Chinese medicine specifically.

Methodology:
This study does not aim to conduct its own qualitative and/or quantitative research. It is limited to a review and critical evaluation of existing evidence-based epistemology and its implications on complementary and alternative medicine. To complement this, I will also carry out research on traditional Chinese medicine to achieve a better understanding of its underlying philosophy and approach to knowledge.

Candidate’s Signature: ___________________________  Date: ________________

Teacher’s Name: ___________________________  Signature: ___________________________  Date: ________________