Fifth Conference of the European Society for Complementary and Natural Medicine

This fifth in a series of biannual conferences of the European Society for Complementary and Natural Medicine (ESCNM) was held in Zaragoza (Spain), May 16–18, 2008, shortly before the EXPO would draw the world’s attention on that city. The conference was marked by the 10-year presidency of Dr. Pablo Saúl Péira (Zaragoza) of the ESCMR, whose statutes allow unlimited presidential re-elections. Consequently, much of the activities and many active members of the ESCMR can be found in Spain.

The topic of the conference, ‘Water in Natural Medicine’, certainly is a heartthrob to anyone involved in the more traditional understanding and practice of ‘natural medicine’ in Europe, which is also the origin of the society. The belief that water is a panacea of ‘European Traditional Medicine’ is a common notion in many countries and several discussions were explicitly or implicitly centred around the Spanish traditions of ‘Hidrología Médica’ and ‘Hidroterapia’. These two approaches are not to be confused – at times they even fight each other. ‘Hidrología Médica’ represents the more official, scientific practice and finally ends in ‘fisioterapia’, whereas ‘Hidroterapia’ has more in common with hydrotherapy as it was practised and written down not only by doctors but also by laymen such as Priessnitz and Kneipp. On the other hand, ‘balneología’ (spa therapy, balneology) has also been very strong in Spain: in 1817 already, a ‘Cuerpo de Medicos de Baños’ (medical body of spa therapy) was founded, many years before any comparable development took place in Europe (Dr. J.A. Antonio Rodríguez Sánchez, History of Science, University of Salamanca). Today, however, it seems there is more understanding and cooperation in Spain than e.g. in Germany between doctors, their medical institutions and societies concerned with either physical and rehabilitative medicine or natural medicine and CAM. There still is a certified 2-years on-the-job training for ‘Hidrología Médica’ as part of a more comprising 4-years training. The scope of lectures at the conference only comprised few presentations of original work, but reached from philosophically driven ideas on the role of water in the medical thinking of traditional Chinese medicine (Dr. Jonas Holst, Aarhus, Denmark and Zaragoza, Spain), to problems of healthy water supply in Spain (Dr. Jose Lluís Berdonces, Barcelona), to the possibilities of regular intake of sea water (Dr. Angel Gracia Rodrigo, Miami Beach, Florida, USA).

Traditional Chinese medicine founds much of its thinking on the role of water, or liquids based on water, in the body and the surroundings as the basis of life, but, surprisingly, uses none of its physiochemical representations as an agent in health delivery. It may surprise that the supply of clean water, without negative effects on health, in a core country of the EU is an issue of a CAM meeting and not an issue of a meeting on public health. Still, there is no place without chlorinated pipe water in Spain,