Commentary

Traditional Korean Medicine education in the World

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Traditional Korean Medicine Education

Introduced in 1951 in Korea, the Traditional Korean Medicine (TKM) education system initially had a four-year college curriculum. Since 1964, this has been reorganized into a six-year curriculum comprising of a two-year premedical course and a four-year medical course. By 1990s the number of TKM schools across the nation had increased to 11, setting common educational goals and standardizing the curriculum. With the establishment of a four-year graduate school for TKM at the Pusan National University in 2008, there are currently 12 schools of Korean Medicine in Korea.

The national TKM schools have organized the educational curriculum with the aim of fostering physicians and Korean medicine doctors while training them in both Korean and conventional medicine. The Institute of Korean Medicine Education and Evaluation was established in 2004 to evaluate and certify the education of TKM schools nationwide, and since 2016, has been acting as a government-certified evaluation authority.

International Medical Education Directory

Before 2014, medical schools worldwide were listed in the International Medical Education Directory (IMED) and the AVICENNA Directories. IMED was run by the Foundation for Advancing International Medical Education and Research, while the AVICENNA Directories were run by the University of Copenhagen, World Health Organization, and World Federation for Medical Education. All the 11 nationwide TKM schools were enrolled in the IMED and AVICENNA Directories until 2010.

In 2007, some TKM doctors procured documents from the Education Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) for taking the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). The ECFMG asked the Ministry of Health and Welfare in Korea whether TKM school graduates were equivalent to conventional medical school graduates in Korea. The Korean ministry responded that TKM school graduates had a degree and qualification equivalent to medical doctors. However, the Korean Medical Association stated that TKM doctors had a different degree and could not practice as conventional doctors, leading the ECFMG to disqualify TKM doctors from taking the USMLE. After this incident, in 2010, the national TKM schools were deleted from the IMED and AVICENNA Directories. In 2014, these two directories were merged into the World Directory of Medical Schools (WDMS) that is run by the IMED; currently, the 12 TKM schools are not included in this directory.

Efforts to re-register as an international educational system

In 2016, the government undertook a project to globalize TKM; therefore, it is important that TKM doctors are able to play a role as medical doctors internationally. Hence, efforts have been made to re-enrol the TKM schools into the WDMS. In 2018, the Ministry of Health and Welfare sent a letter to the IMED requesting that TKM schools to be listed on the WDMS. The Ministry of Health and Welfare in Korea had the following opinions: 1) TKM medicine doctors can perform medical practices independently and the TKM licenses managed by the government are the same as those for conventional medical doctors, 2) TKM schools have a curriculum based on the principles of science and publish papers based on the principles of medical science, 3) TKM doctors are responsible for primary medical practice in Korea; they are in charge of official medical documents (such as the birth certificate) and play a role within the national public health system, 4) Traditional Chinese medicine schools are also listed in the WDMS which is against equity. However, IMED excluded eight Traditional Chinese medicine schools additionally from WDMS in 2019.

Accreditation as an international medical education institution for traditional medical colleges

TKM schools were fostered under the goal of building expertise in both Eastern and Western medicine. These schools provide basic courses for diagnosing and treating patients and academic courses for training primary physicians. Therefore, the Korean government treats TKM doctors equally as conventional medicine doctor as primary physicians under the law and reports the number of doctors including TKM doctors to the OECD. However, these are currently unlisted on the WDMS due to political reasons, and efforts to resolve this issue are necessary. Of course, internal efforts to continuously improve the quality of the curriculum at TKM schools will be necessary. However, it is undeniable that the lack of WDMS registration due to opposition from the Korean Medical Association is backed by political reasons for working area conflict in Korea. It is necessary to agree upon the scope of the role of TKM doctors and the quality of education in TKM schools. After this has been established, an objective assessment based on international standards should be performed, which would enable the listing of these schools in the WDMS.
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Conflict of interest

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Ethical statement

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Data availability

The data used for this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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