

Finding the fun

Professor Marc Cohen believes in putting complementary medicine to the test and then using what works to help patients ...

PROFESSOR Marc Cohen went in to medicine to have fun.

"I've been on the same path for 30 years," Professor Cohen tells the *MJA*. "To be honest, when I was a kid I just wanted to have fun, and that's been a real focus for me all my life. When I went in to medicine, it was because I figured I could learn about life, death and everything in between, and how to live a well, healthy life that would allow me to have the most fun possible."

On the way, Professor Cohen became a GP with degrees in physiology and psychological medicine, as well as PhDs in Chinese medicine and biomedical engineering. He has since become Australia's first Professor of Complementary Medicine at RMIT University in Melbourne, and has led the way in pioneering integrative and holistic medicine. When asked to define integrative medicine, Professor Cohen has a simple answer.

"Integrative medicine is the integration into medicine of practices that work," he says.

The term "complementary" is an attempt to rebrand "alternative" medicine, he says.

"After all, most people don't use it as an alternative to Western medicine. They use it as an adjunct to 'complement' western medicine." According to his online biography,¹ he "is a Board Member of the Global Wellness Summit, Past-President (from 2000-2007) of the Australasian Integrative Medicine Association (AIMA), a member of the RACGP-AIMA Joint Working party and sits on the editorial board of five international journals; has previously held positions as Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Medical and Health Sciences Education at Monash University, Expert Advisor to the TGA Complementary Medicine Evaluation Committee, Member of the NHMRC Grant Review panel on Primary Healthcare, Member of the Scientific Advisory Committee

for the National Institute of Complementary Medicine and multiple ministerial appointments on various Registration and Accreditation Panels; he previously held the position as Director of the Centre for Complementary Medicine at the Monash Institute for Health Services Research".

Of his time at Monash he says: "That's when I was the 'alternative' guy surrounded by Western medicine practitioners. Now I'm the Western medicine guy surrounded by alternative medicine practitioners."

"I walk a professional tightrope," he says. "I try to find the middle ground and stay balanced and I like to surround myself with high-calibre, open-minded people."

It's his life work, he says, to study and test complementary medicines and lifestyle practices to evaluate their worth as aids to good health and he is now researching healthy living through bathing practices, herbal teas, health retreats, yoga and hot springs.

In a climate where there are zealots on both sides of the complementary medicine debate, Professor Cohen finds himself frustrated by academics who refuse to countenance investigation of non-Western alternatives.

"While I was still at Monash, I wanted to do a randomised control trial on acupuncture, so I went to one of the professors and the answer was 'I don't believe in it'", he says.

"That was frustrating. It's not about belief, it's about putting it under scientific scrutiny, gathering evidence."

One of Professor Cohen's current passions is the potential of bathing as a global health measure.

"One in three people on the planet do not have access to water for bathing," he tells the *MJA*. "That's 2.4 billion people who are unable to wash off their blood, urine and faeces."

"If every person on the planet had 10 litres of water a day – you would transform global health – hygiene would improve, people

would regain their dignity. Bathing can also profoundly transform your mind and body through changing the temperature – whether it be a relaxing warm bath, an ice-bath or sauna."

In September of 2018 Professor Cohen and his two teenage sons will

join forces with Dutch daredevil Wim "the Iceman" Hof to climb Tanzania's Mt Kilimanjaro in just 24 hours, wearing nothing but board shorts. Hof who has multiple world records for ice bathing and other extreme feats, has developed the Wim Hof Method, which uses breathing techniques, cold exposure and mental focus to improve health and wellbeing. Professor Cohen's role will be to coordinate research on the effects of extreme altitude and cold on human physiology during the expedition.

Professor Cohen's advice to students is simple.

"There is only medicine that works, and medicine that doesn't work," he says. "No one person has ownership of the truth. Just because there may not be a high level of evidence for something doesn't mean that it doesn't work."

"Get as many perspectives as possible.

"Remember that you bring your humanity to the table when you are with your patient. Who you are is just as important as what you do. "Try to become a well-rounded person."

"I didn't design my career this way, I've just been following my passion. That's all you need to do."

*** Professor Cohen has a letter published in this issue of the *MJA*.**

Reference

1. <http://drmarc.co/about-dr-marc/>

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doi: 10.5694/mja18.0503C1



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