

Research in Korean Medical Colleges

In this issue, a special article that analyses the scientific contribution of Korean medical colleges to MEDLINE database (*J Korean Med Sci* 2000;15:3-12) is published. The article demonstrates a weak contribution to the database until the 1980s and a remarkable growth of productivity during the 1990s. This may indeed be an explicit indication of the strength of Korean medical research, however, absolute contribution, even that of last year, was limited when compared both to the world productivity of medical knowledge and to the Korean productivity in other science fields. This article presents a number of questions to the past and future of research in Korean medical colleges.

The first question lies on the reason for the weak contribution to the international medical database. In short, Korean medical research has been "a frog within a well." Putting aside a history during the first half of the last century when only a few elite researchers worked under Japanese professors, medical research in Korea actually began after the Korean War in the latter half of 1950s. Medical doctors and researchers were educated, trained and brain stormed by practical and scientific American medicine and the new education and research systems were adopted. Blessed with an increasing health care demand during the turmoil of industrialization, the academic medicine in Korea successfully adjusted to the new concepts and constantly updated the techniques of modern medicine. Together with the increased medical care facilities and improved medical services, the number of medical colleges has shown a dramatic rise from eight to 41. Now a total of 107 academic societies has been enlisted in the Korean Academy of Medical Sciences. The number of Korean medical journals published by professional medical societies and colleges is over 100, excluding those of dental, veterinary, nursing and public health categories. However, despite the numerical growth of medical infrastructure, many pessimists think that the genuine core of modern medicine, i.e. research, has not been developed in Korea.

During the period of exuberant deployment and expansion, medical research activities, with only few exceptions, have been relatively dormant and were restricted to domestic level without reaching an international standard. Such weakness in research activities can be explained by various facts. For instance, as in the case of

medical service facilities, about 80% of medical education was executed in private sector that acted also as a major contributor to medical research until the late 1980s. In supporting research, private sector, by nature, prefers immediate results, thus failing to back basic scientific research that often requires long-term studies. The strength of private sector has waned since the early 1990s when parsimonious National Health Insurance began to serve all Koreans. In addition, unfortunately medical research was supported scarcely by public grant agencies until the late 1980s.

Traditional Confucian culture in Korea may be another reason for the weakness in research. Rather than encouraging creativity, the culture has supported collective thinking and social cooperation. In view point of knowledge, introduction and spread of established knowledge are quick while its independent development by research was weak.

Then, one might question, how could the restricted contributions increase so rapidly during the 1990s? The Korea Science and Engineering Foundation and the Korea Research Foundation which are giants of public research grant agencies in Korea and are supported by the Government, had placed medical research in low priority until the end of 1980s. The Health Technology Planning and Evaluation Board of Ministry of Health and Welfare were established and began to grant research funds as recently as in 1995. Although denominator was small, the growth rate of medical research grants has been high during some years until outbreak of the financial crisis in 1997. The globalization policy of Korean Government declared in 1994 has also changed social milieu. "Knowledge production" and "SCI journals" became common terms used in the medical research institutes. As shown in this issue's article, there have been several core medical research groups where talented young researchers have been nurtured by several leaders in research. Some of the top research groups have written and published their papers as much as those in western countries do.

What would be the future of researches in Korean medical colleges? With respect to the future of research in Korean medical colleges, one of the most promising aspects would be the research-oriented minds which have been rooted during the past decade. Korean medical

researchers began to jump higher toward the international journals. They became more confident due to the recent, successful experiences. Dark sides? There are many. The growth of research grant size was prematurely halted by the financial crisis in 1997. Afterwards, the research policy of the grant giving agencies turned radically to supporting large-scale, commercial products-oriented researches including Brain Korea 21 (BK21) of Ministry of Education. In this respect, medical colleges where most research groups are still small in size, have not been prepared for such changes and consequently many of them failed the competitions of 1:10 or higher during the last two years. Even worse, the recent realiza-

tion policy of drug prices in the National Health Insurance significantly reduce revenue of most medical institutes, which can shake the fragile structure of medical research.

The evident plight of research environment depresses the mind of research staffs in Korean medical colleges. Looking back on what have been achieved in the last decade, Korean medical researchers can console themselves and learn more from research activities of leading medical departments both home and abroad.

The Editor

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Erratum

Running heads on title pages of each article which appeared in the December, 1999 issue of *Journal of Korean Medical Science* should be read as *J Korean Med Sci* 1999;14:pages instead of *J Korean Med Sci* 1999;15:pages. The Editor of *J Korean Med Sci* regrets the copy editing errors.
