

No alternative to closure for complementary medicine centre

After trying for nearly 7 years to combine alternative and conventional methods of health care, Vancouver's Tzu Chi Institute for Complementary and Alternative Medicine was to close Mar. 31.

"It's a terrible shame," said executive director Barbara Findlay. "Just when the institute's research was showing the tremendous impact we could have on the health of people living with chronic illness, funding was pulled in favour of acute care."

The chair of the institute's board, Tim Kerr, said the problems began in spring 2002 when the BC Ministry of Health decided to slice the institute's operating grant. "Our ministry-funded partners followed suit," he said. "That represented almost half of our budget."

Kerr said the institute tried to cope by making substantial staffing and operational cuts, and had hoped for increased revenue from new services, memberships and charitable donations. "Those revenue sources simply did not materialize fast enough," he said.

The institute was the first and only organization of its kind in Canada. A registered charity, it was founded in 1996 thanks to a \$2-million gift from the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation Canada. The institute itself was a centre for treatment, research and education involving alternative medicine, with an underlying aim to incorporate alternative practices into mainstream health care. "We [worked] with people to bring out their own innate healing ability," said Findlay. "We have been advocates for change in the way health care is offered. It will now be up to others to carry this torch." — *Brian Whitwham, CMAJ*

Pfizer, Lipitor

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WHO updates vCJD toll

One hundred and thirty-nine cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) have been documented since the first case was reported in March 1996, the World Health Organization says. Only 1 case, involving a podiatrist who studied in England, has been reported in Canada (*CMAJ* 2002;167[6]:680). By November 2002, 129 cases had been reported in the United Kingdom, 6 in France, and 1 each in Ireland, Italy and the US.

WHO says the vCJD cases are proving far different from the classical presentation of CJD because younger people are being affected (average age of 29 years vs. 65 years) and there is a longer duration of illness (14 months vs. 4.5 months).

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, the cattle-borne disease thought responsible for the spread of vCJD in humans, had been confirmed in 181 376 cattle in the UK by November 2002; only 3286 cases have been reported in all other countries, and none in Canada.

However, concern about vCJD is so widespread that WHO (www.who.int, click on Media Centre) has issued a list of 8 questions consumers should ask if worried about infection. — *CMAJ*