Tibetans have long held medicine to be one of the main pillars of their own system of ‘sciences’ (rig gnas). Yet, the complex social history and scope of Tibetan medical knowledge and practices have remained largely unknown to non-Tibetans, despite the fact that some quite substantial and careful studies on Tibetan medicine have been published to date. Until recently, medicine appears to have remained of somewhat marginal interest to scholars within the field of modern Tibetan Studies. A new impulse for a more focused discussion on studies of Tibetan medicine was the goal behind a specific panel at the International Association for Tibetan Studies Seminar at Oxford University, 2003. The present volume is the outcome of this first modest attempt to establish Tibetan medicine closer to the centre of the discipline of Tibetan Studies where it certainly belongs.

Research on Tibetan medicine is still in its infancy, especially when compared with scholarly works on the other great medical traditions of Asia, such as Āyurveda and Chinese medicine. Furthermore, interested parties have often portrayed Tibetan medicine in competing and misleading ways. On the one hand, since Western standards and national interests play a dominant role in the delivery of medicine today, and due to competition with state-supported biomedicine, Tibetan medicine is sometimes presented as a ‘scientific’ system (in the Western sense),

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1 As organiser of the panel and editor of this volume, I am very grateful for the institutional support provided by the convenor of the conference, Charles Ramble, and his staff. I also thank The Wellcome Trust for the History of Medicine at University College London for financial support provided to stage the panel.

2 I wish to acknowledge here the important pioneering work by Fernand Meyer, Ronald Emmerick, Manfred Taube and Elizabeth Finckh. Due to various circumstances, papers by the following presenters in the Oxford panel could not be included in this volume: Kim Gutschow, Janet Gyatso, Susanne von der Heide, Yangga Trarong, and Tenzin Namdul. Janet Gyatso’s paper has been published in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. The chapters by Henk Blezer, Resi Hofer, and my own were not formally presented at the Oxford panel. Laurent Pordié who unfortunately was not able to attend the IATS conference in Oxford is also editing a book on Tibetan medicine, *Tibetan Medicine in Contemporary Context*.
stripped of its traditional ‘supernatural’ or religious elements. This is the increasing tendency within both China and the Tibetan exile community. However, on the other hand, Tibetan medicine is still often presented as a rather monolithic cultural tradition, being ancient and unchanged, and therefore ‘authentic’. For example, while the *Rgyud bzhi* is invariably cited as the standard source and legitimation for Tibetan medical knowledge as though it were a uniform and unchanging text, in reality it has been constantly edited, revised and reinterpreted by many different users.

This volume attempts to break through such simplified images by bringing together and focusing on new anthropological and historical perspectives on Tibetan medicine. Why might it be fruitful to combine these two approaches? For instance, the institutionalisation and standardisation of Tibetan medicine could be understood as a particular modern development. However, these processes go back to the late 17th century, when the famous medical college of Chagpori (Lcags po ri) was founded in Lhasa and the major medical commentaries were written by Desi Sangye Gyatsho (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho) who synthesised a great many of the medical texts of his day. Thus, it is only by way of gradual and careful comparison of a wider variety of medical texts and practices, and also by careful research on its social history, that we can gain a clearer picture of Tibetan medicine in all its complexity. This includes the influences upon it from other medical traditions of Indian and Chinese provenience, as well as its variety of localised traditions, its interface with other Tibetan healing practices, and finally its increasingly complex relationship with modern biomedicine. Socio-political and historical factors, such as colonialism, state policies and exile, are also important forces that have transformed and continue to shape the theory and practice of Tibetan medicine into the 21st century. They also influence the way in which we understand the history of Tibetan medicine. An examination of these factors and their influence will inform us much more about how Tibetans have understood and engaged with issues of health, illness and healing in any particular time and space. This is what the present volume tries to initiate, by bringing together a wide variety of essays authored by historians and anthropologists, and representing their most recent research on Tibetan medicine.

When we try to define the term ‘Tibetan medicine’ (bod sman) we face a further challenge. We might start with the classical definition of