



TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM)

A brief history of traditional Chinese medicine

The term “traditional Chinese medicine” (TCM) is used to describe the system of medicine that has developed in China. The earliest written records of TCM date back 3,500 years, and archeologic discoveries suggest the origins of TCM may stretch back at least 5,000 years.

Although it is called traditional, TCM has changed over time and is very much a part of the modern world. In its more than 2,000 years of recorded history, TCM has evolved under many influences, including politics, economics, science, technology, and social and cultural changes. At one point in its very long history, TCM came close to being officially replaced by Western medicine. With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, China’s leaders were intent on creating a new and modern state, and that included Western medicine. By the mid-1950s, however, traditional Chinese medicine had regained popularity, and the first four of many medical colleges were established. TCM has continued to grow as a system of medicine, and educational programs ranging from technical certificates to Ph.Ds are available to students. TCM, particularly as it is practised in China today, incorporates and adapts Western scientific and technological developments and applies them where and when appropriate.

Some concepts in TCM

Traditional Chinese medicine is as complex and specialized as conventional medicine. Although it is impossible to summarize even the main concepts and principles in a fact sheet, we have touched briefly on some of these below.

- The idea of pairs of opposites in balance, like day and night, sun and moon, light and dark, male and female, is expressed by yin and yang. Yin and yang are sometimes graphically represented by the Taoist symbol.
- *Qi* (pronounced chee, also written *chi*, *ch'i*) is often translated as vital force, or vital energy, or life force. *Qi* is both energy and matter. *Qi* flows in, around, and through the body in channels or meridians.
- The organs or organ systems of the body as described in TCM are quite different from the Western understanding. Although most organs are similar to the Western concept in name and location, in TCM they may play a different role. For example, a patient may be diagnosed by a TCM doctor as having a liver deficiency even though the liver is perfectly normal and functional in conventional terms.
- Disease may be caused by external or internal factors. The six external causes of disease, sometimes called the six evils, are wind, cold, fire, damp, summer heat, and dryness. The



internal causes of disease, sometimes translated as the seven affects, are joy, anger, anxiety, thought, sorrow, fear, fright.

Diagnosis

A TCM doctor uses four main techniques to assess a patient and arrive at a diagnosis.

- 1. Visual:** looking at the tongue, complexion, and skin, and observing the patient's behaviour.
- 2. Listening and smelling:** listening to the quality, pitch, and tone of the patient's voice; smelling body odours.
- 3. Questioning:** asking detailed questions about the patient's symptoms, complaints, lifestyle, etc.
- 4. Touching:** the TCM doctor is trained to assess the patient's pulse (at the wrist, through the radial artery) in a highly complex fashion, which can yield as many as 21 different pulses.

Once the patient has been assessed, the TCM doctor can classify the problem and then decide on the best course of treatment. Treatment is tailored to the individual patient, depending on how the illness or complaint is classified.

Treatment

Treatment in TCM is basically allopathic, in that conditions or diseases are treated with opposite measures. For example, a condition related to cold is treated with heat, one related to a deficit is treated with supplementation, and one related to an excess is treated with drainage.

The principles of treatment that guide the doctor of TCM are: treating the cause of an illness directly; treating the cause and, at the same time, supporting and encouraging the body's own ability to "cure" the illness; or supporting the body without treating the cause directly. This last approach is called *fu zheng*, which is often translated as "supporting the righteous."

No matter which approach they use, TCM doctors have a variety of tools and techniques for treatment. Not all TCM practitioners will use

all the techniques available. Like conventional physicians, TCM doctors may specialize in certain types of diseases or treatments.

Medicine

Medicine is not limited to herbs but also includes minerals and animal products. Prescriptions can be complex and may include as many as 20 or more ingredients. Some of the ingredients may treat the cause of the illness directly, others may support the body's own defenses, while still others may help reduce the side effects of other ingredients.

Medicines may be taken as teas, liquid extracts, capsules, and tablets. Although preparing teas can be time-consuming (the teas may have to be boiled, then steeped, strained, and left to cool), this may be the best way to obtain an individually tailored treatment. Some commonly used prescriptions are premixed and available as tablets. Although these are more convenient to take, the pills may not be as precise a match for a certain condition as individualized teas. Some medicines may be made from powdered ingredients that are mixed for each individual prescription and put into capsules.

Acupuncture

By inserting fine needles into the body, the TCM doctor can affect the flow of *qi*, relieving blockages, and diverting the flow. The *qi* can be redirected to organs or areas of the body where there is a deficiency or away from areas where there is an excess.

Moxibustion

Moxibustion refers to the burning of small amounts of dried and powdered *moxa* (a herb known as *Artemisia vulgaris*, *ai ye*, or mugwort) on or over the body. *Moxa* can affect the flow of *qi* and is often used in combination with acupuncture.

Tui Na

Although the term *Tui Na* is sometimes translated as "pushing and pulling," it really refers to a



system of massage, body manipulation, and stimulation of acupuncture points by hand. *Tui Na* may be used to stimulate the flow of *qi*, to treat neurological or orthopedic problems, or as a substitute for acupuncture when needles may be inappropriate (for children, for example).

Qigong

Qigong (pronounced chee goong, also written as Chi Kung, Chi Gong, Qi Gong, etc.) is a way of manipulating or affecting the flow of *qi* through exercise, breathing, and meditation. It is similar to Tai Chi, but *qigong* exercises are said to produce much stronger healing effects. As a daily practice, *qigong* may be particularly useful in maintaining good health and preventing illness.

Dietary treatment

The TCM doctor may prescribe certain foods, seasonings, or dishes that have healing properties. Other foods or alcohol may be removed from the diet to enhance healing.

TCM and HIV/AIDS

HIV infection and AIDS may be classified in a number of ways. HIV is generally recognized as an “external evil” that invades the body through the path of least resistance. As a result, protecting or strengthening areas of weakness is of utmost importance. But how the TCM doctor identifies HIV/AIDS will determine which treatment is to be used. Different TCM doctors may view HIV/AIDS as a warm disease, a disease of deficiency, a deficiency of yin and kidney, or a heat-caused disease. In Western terms, all or part of the treatment may be directed at strengthening or stimulating the immune system. TCM diagnostic techniques may be used to predict the type of opportunistic infection to which the patient may be most susceptible. Treatment may then be directed to prevent problems in those areas.

TCM and conventional medicine

Many HIV-positive people use TCM to

complement conventional medical treatment. TCM may be used to help stabilize and strengthen the immune system after conventional medication has been used to treat an infection. Some people use TCM to relieve or lessen the side effects of conventional medicine. Because there is the potential for interactions between conventional drugs and TCM medicines, patients should keep both their medical and TCM doctors informed of all the treatments they use.

A variety of Chinese herbs have been tested in laboratory studies and have been shown to have anti-HIV effects. Often the virus-fighting effects have occurred because the herb studied has strengthened or improved the ability of cells to resist infection.

Studies of acupuncture have shown that the treatment may stimulate the immune system by increasing the production of interferons (chemical messengers), improving the bacteria-killing ability of white blood cells and increasing the number of red blood cells. Acupuncture has also been studied as a treatment for HIV-related peripheral neuropathy. Although one large study found no significant difference in pain relief between acupuncture, standard medical treatment, and placebo, the acupuncture points studied in this trial were standardized, so that everyone received exactly the same treatment. Usually acupuncture treatments are designed to fit the individual, and, as the researchers concluded, individualized treatments may have different effects.

Unfortunately, most of the vast amount of research into TCM has been published in Chinese-language medical and scientific journals.

Finding a TCM doctor

To be qualified as a TCMD (Doctor of Traditional Chinese Medicine), a practitioner must be a graduate of a Chinese Medicine university or have completed a four-year program specializing in TCM after having completed their undergraduate degree. The Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture



Association of Canada recommends that people with complicated illnesses like HIV visit a fully qualified TCMD. For help finding a TCM doctor in your area, contact

The Acupuncture Foundation of Canada
Institute
2131 Lawrence Ave. E. (office)
Scarborough, ON M1R 5G4
(416) 752-3988

Naturopathic doctors study TCM as part of their training and many include it in their practices. To find a naturopath in your area, contact

The Canadian Naturopathic Association
1255 Sheppard Ave. E.
Toronto, ON M2K 1E2
1-800-551-4381

The cost of treatment varies among practitioners, and many TCM doctors offer a sliding-fee scale. Some employee health-insurance policies cover part of the costs associated with treatments. Medicines vary in cost but, in most cases, are relatively inexpensive.

Credits

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Further reading

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Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.

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