

The Acupuncturist's Quiver: *East Asian Medicine*

This last year in Washington State the name of the license that we hold in order to practice our profession changed. We were “licensed acupuncturists,” and now we are “East Asian Medicine practitioners.” Like most of us, I am at least a little resistant to change, so the announcement irked me. Although “acupuncturist” doesn’t really describe well what it is that we do, it has become an acceptable and accepted title that has gained recognition and, therefore, some integration into our collective notion of healthcare and its delivery system. When most folks hear the term, acupuncturist, they have an idea, incomplete as it may be, of what we do. East Asian Medicine practitioner, on the other hand, sounds sort of foreign, vague and mysterious. It does, however, by virtue of its vagueness, make room for all the things that we acupuncturists do while practicing our profession, and it is ultimately a better title for us. Now it’s up to us to educate the public about East Asian Medicine. So, what else do we use besides acupuncture needles to help make our patients better?

Chinese Herbs (You could say, East Asian Herbs!)

Medicinal herbs tend to be de-emphasized in the west, while in Asia they are the greatest component of this traditional system of healing. The reason for this has been debated ad nauseum among scholars, philosophers, and policy makers. The short answer is that herbs compete too closely with big Pharma, which doesn’t change the fact that Chinese herbal medicine is one of the most elegant and complex systems for treating disease ever developed in human history. Its written record is continuous for over two thousand years, and those earliest records describe a system of such sophistication and nuance that we can assume it had already been around for hundreds or thousands of years. Today, in the modern clinic, we commonly prescribe herbal formulas that have been used for hundreds of years. We are also seeing an accelerated evolution of modern Chinese herbal medicine due to the expansion of Chinese herbs out of Asia to Australia, America, and Europe. The healthcare needs of, say, the cities of the United States are very different than those of rural, agrarian China, and the medicine is transforming rapidly to accommodate these different needs. We have the perception in the west that if a medicine is white and pure and comes from a lab then it is safe, while if it is exotic and from the jungle or from China it could be unsafe, when actually the reverse is generally more accurate. Pharmaceutical drugs are single chemical compounds that are administered at a dosage far closer to toxic levels than the constituents of an Asian herbal formula. Rarely is a patient given a single herb to take, rather he or she will get a formula consisting of anywhere from two to twenty (or more) herbs which can be customized and adjusted to suit the specific and changing needs of that patient. In such a formula there is no single compound that is anywhere close to toxic levels, and active ingredients are surrounded by all kinds of natural buffers and balancers. I like to say that medicinal herbs blur the line between food and medicine, which is a good thing!

Moxibustion

I remember the first time it was offered to me. Would I like to have some acupuncture points warmed up by burning the fuzz from Chinese mugwort leaves near them? I was in pain and desperate, so I said okay. I had seen something like this in a Bruce Lee film: After getting worked over by two dozen bad-guys, Bruce retreated to his lair and was nursed back to fighting form by his wise old attendant who applied liniments and burned this strange punk on the ends of the acupuncture needles. As the distinctive aroma of moxa filled my nostrils and the pleasant warmth of the embers near my skin took effect, I remember wondering, "How do they get the fuzz off of the mugwort leaves?" After that session I felt better than I had in months. Moxibustion got my attention! The herb, *Artemesia vulgaris*, is also used in herbal tea formulas. It is very warming and moving of Qi and Blood. Both moxibustion and teas made with this herb are used to treat gynecological conditions such as dysmenorrhea, amenorrhea, irregular menstruation, infertility and cramps. Moxibustion is also very effective for treating joint pain. *Cold* and *Dampness* are considered pathogenic evils in Chinese medicine. Here in the Pacific Northwest we have a cold, damp climate which can engender or accentuate these pathogenic influences. Moxibustion is excellent for treating arthritis and joint pain, especially when it is of a cold and damp nature.

Cupping

Cupping is another one of the wonderful techniques that East Asian Medicine practitioners use to treat a wide variety of conditions. With cupping the practitioner creates a localized suction or vacuum near the location of pain or trauma or along a given acupuncture channel. Massage, acupressure, shiatsu, structural integration, and other forms of manual manipulation of the body primarily entail the application of pressure to the body in various ways. Cupping does just the opposite! It applies negative pressure, pulling tissue away from other tissue -- muscle away from the skeleton, fascia away from muscle, etc. It offers yet another way to move Qi and Blood in the body. Cupping is popular throughout Asia but it also has a long history in the Middle East, Russia, Finland, Poland and the Balkans. I've seen people have lackluster results with acupuncture and then dramatic improvement after a treatment or two of cupping. It works very well for pediatric lung conditions like asthma and persistent cough. I often use it on patients who have chronic pain due to a motor vehicle accident. Cupping is also a logical alternative for patients who are needle-phobic.

Gua Sha

Gua sha means "scrape sand" in Chinese, which admittedly sounds less than pleasant, however if you ask someone who has experienced it, chances are they'll tell you it feels good. It is a form of superficial massage using a tool such as a soup spoon (the kind you get with your wonton soup), a large coin, or a purpose-made gua sha horn. If massage pushes with pressure and cupping pulls with

vacuum, then gua sha falls in between by dragging or scraping the skin and superficial tissue sideways. It is performed “dry” or with oil or lotion, and it is most commonly done on the channels of the back and neck, though it can be used on other parts of the body, especially for stubborn pain due to historic trauma. I use a gentle version of gua sha on young people who are leery of acupuncture needles to effectively treat common cold, cough, tummy-ache, fever, irritability and other pediatric complaints. Like cupping, gua sha can cause temporary discoloration (bruising) of the skin. This is well known and culturally accepted in Asia, but must be explained in advance to western gua sha candidates.

Diet and Lifestyle Counseling

No holistic healthcare modality would be complete without addressing diet and lifestyle. Beyond the usual healthy habits of regular exercise, good sleep, and a diet rich in whole, natural foods, East Asian Medicine looks at the patient’s constitution and makes recommendations that help in specific ways to return that patient to a state of greater balance and health. Everyone is different, so depending on the diagnosis, one patient might need more warming, drying foods while another might need cooling or moistening foods. In fact, the same diagnostic process that is used to determine what herbal formula would be helpful for someone, is also used to recommend foods, beverages, and seasonings.

The common thread that holds all of these therapeutic techniques and treatments together as elements of East Asian Medicine is an ancient theoretical system, informed by the natural world, that guides the practitioner in assessing the individual patient and administering these therapies to help restore balance and health. Acupuncture, herbs, cupping, gua sha, diet and lifestyle counseling, and a handful of other techniques not discussed here are all informed by ... I guess we must now call it East Asian Medicine theory. It has successfully treated more people over more centuries than any other medical system, and it continues to evolve rapidly as global healthcare needs evolve in the 21st Century. At present it sits on the fringe of western healthcare, but if the predictions of Rudolph Ballentine, MD (one of my favorite medical authors) comes true, we will someday have a truly integrative healthcare system that incorporates the best of all traditional and modern medicine, and the East Asian kind will be right in there.

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