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Chapter 2: “A Patients Guide to Acupuncture and Herbs”

An excerpt from *A Patient's Guide to Chinese Medicine: Dr. Shen's Handbook of Herbs and Acupuncture*, by Joel Harvey Schreck, L.Ac, founder of Dr. Shen's Chinese Herbs

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Visiting an acupuncturist or a practitioner of Chinese Medicine is unlike your usual trip to a Western doctor. For those new to this experience, this chapter explains those differences and provides recommendations to get the most out of your trips to acupuncturists and herbologists.

Some dissimilarities are obvious. Practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) use unfamiliar techniques, uncommon substances, and reference an unusual philosophy, at least to most Westerners. Do not expect them to have the same training or patient-doctor approach as Western physicians. During your first office visit, ask your practitioner what they prefer to be called. Many practitioners prefer to be called doctor, which is the accepted practice in China.

The TCM practitioner must be curious about the patient, and will want to know about their life. Disease is rooted in the patient's experiences, so the practitioner must become a detective, sifting through signs, symptoms, and clues to solve the disease and restore harmony to the patient. The practitioner may administer herbs or acupuncture, or consult philosophical principles to illuminate the cause and permit the cure. The Four Examinations are used to diagnose the patient.

The Four Examinations

- 1. Looking** – The TCM practitioner observes the patient's body, tone, gait, skin, facial expression, emotional tone, and mannerisms. The doctor looks carefully at the tongue. The heart revealed at the tip, the kidneys at the root. The color and appearance of the tongue and tongue coating show what may be hidden; revealing hot from cold, damp from dry; and true from false.
- 2. Listening** – The practitioner must be attentive to the patient's story and history, putting aside preconceptions. The practitioner listens to the patient's voice, noting its volume and clarity, as well as manner of speaking and use of language. The voice can also reveal ailments.
- 3. Smelling and Tasting** – The practitioner may ask the about your body odors and tastes. Smells and tastes are clues. Strong tastes and odors or can be signs of heat, toxicity or digestive stagnation.
- 4. Touching** - The practitioner feels the pulse on both wrists. Besides noting its rate, rhythm, and overall strength, doctor may note the type of pulse. It is difficult to express in words what is meant by the “quality” of the

pulse.” Detecting the pulse is an art that is challenging to master, yet once mastered rewards the practitioner with the ability to sense something of the internal condition of the patient. The patient may not tell the truth, but the pulse never lies. To guide practitioners to feel the pulse, the ancients defined twenty-eight types.

When is a Practitioner Qualified?

Be sure to check the background practitioners, because there are many acupuncturists who do not practice the complete science. In the United States and Europe, most Chinese medicine professionals are acupuncturists, but not all acupuncturists are practitioners of TCM. Learning the skills of diagnosis and herbal prescription takes much longer than learning the basic placement of acupuncture needles.

Each state in the USA sets its own standards for acupuncturists. In a few states, namely California and New Mexico, acupuncturists have physician status and are required to pass state board examinations covering Western medicine and Chinese herbal medicine. Most other states recognize passing the NCCAOM (National Committee for the Certification of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine) examination as a standard for licensure for acupuncture. A separate examination is given for Chinese herbal medicine, however passing the herb exam is not required anywhere for practice of acupuncture or anything at this time. This means that outside of California and New Mexico, the practice of Chinese herbal medicine is essentially unregulated in the Western world. As Chinese herbal medicine is said to represent 80% of the potential value of TCM, it is hoped that states will soon adopt the California or the NCCAOM herbal exam as a licensing standard to help insure competence and to protect the public.

Acupuncture educational requirements are much better established, and in general, are constantly being upgraded. Besides having to do coursework worthy of medical school students, California acupuncturists are now required to do 30 hours of Continuing Education each year to continue to use the initials L.Ac. after their names. You’ll actually find a confusing variety of initials after acupuncturists’ names. This is what they stand for:

C.A. - Certified Acupuncturist. This means that an acupuncture school has granted this person a certificate of completion. School programs can vary from 200 hours of training to 2,000 hours. Some school programs include herbal medicine training, some don’t. A CA is not a license to practice.

L.Ac. - Licensed Acupuncturist. This is a license to practice. These practitioners have passed state board examinations. In California and New Mexico, these acupuncturists are primary care physicians, which means you can use them as your doctor. They can order lab tests, do physical exams, accept insurance (when it covers acupuncture), and accept Worker’s Compensation cases. Acupuncturists cannot perform surgery and can prescribe only “drugless substances”, whatever that means.

O.M.D. or D.O.M. - Doctor of Oriental Medicine. You see these letters frequently, but its meaning is not straightforward. This is not a license to practice. It’s a doctoral degree offered by a school. At present there are only a handful of U.S. accredited OMD or DOM degrees, and even fewer graduates. However, the state of New Mexico allows its certified acupuncturists to use the title OMD. Some practitioners who use these initials are simply registered to practice in New Mexico and do not have advanced degrees.

M.D. (China) - Medical Doctor, licensed to practice medicine only in China - not outside of China. These physicians are trained in Western medicine in China and are not allowed to practice Western medicine in the U.S. Many of them, unable to practice modern medicine in the U.S., take up the practice of Oriental medicine instead. These initials don’t indicate any training in Oriental medicine.

Dipl. Ac. or Dipl. Herb - Diplomat in Acupuncture. - Diplomat in Herbology. The bearer of these initials has passed a NCCAOM (National Committee for the Certification of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine) exam-

ination, and is a dues-paying member of the NCCAOM. There are separate exams for acupuncture and herbs. Though not a license, the acupuncture test is used by many states as a qualifying exam.

What We Expect from the Patient

We expect the patient to take their medicine - as directed:

Chinese medicine is not easy. It requires much more from the patient than does modern medicine. Most of us are used to spending 10 minutes with the doctor and taking one pill a day for our ailment. Chinese medicine can require far more time, including time spent having needles inserted in you, time spent preparing and taking herbs several times a day, and time for meditation, exercise, and doing whatever is required to harmonize your life. For those with chronic or serious afflictions, we expect Chinese medicine to be a life-changing experience.

We expect the patient to stay the course:

How long will it take? The practitioner cannot be sure at first. In general, the older the condition, the longer the course of treatment. In acute problems, results can happen immediately. Recently sprained ankles often feel better and heal noticeably after a single acupuncture treatment. YIN Chiao and other Chinese cold medicines work within an hour. Stomach Curing Pills relieve nausea within ten minutes. Superior Sore Throat Powder stops a sore throat instantly upon application.

Chronic, long term, or recurring ailments are more complicated, more difficult to treat, and require patience. Sometimes it is helpful for chronically ill people to see wellness as a mountain that is distant but in plain sight. You are finally on the road that leads there, but there are many turns in the road. Sometimes you may appear to be going in the wrong direction. The journey to the mountain might be longer than the crow flies, but if you stay on the road, stay the course of treatment, you will arrive at your destination.

One rule of thumb for chronic complaints is that it will take a month for every year. An ailment that you've had for five years may take as long as five months to completely resolve. Relief, however, may be obtained much faster. When asked how long it will take to get some relief, I tell my acupuncture patients that I'm not sure how long it will take, but if I haven't helped them at all after six visits, I probably won't be able to help.

How to Take Your Medicine

Pills, powders, plasters, tinctures, tonics and teas—There are many ways to take Chinese herbs. We find that the herbs are extremely reliable when properly prescribed and administered. If the herbs are not working, the problem is usually not with the herbs, it's with the patient. The mistake most new patients make is to not take enough medicine. Our fears about taking these unfamiliar substances, coupled with the large dosages required, cause many people to under-dose. Though some people can get results with smaller doses, it is far better to take the traditional dose, which has been determined by generations of trial and error.

If you find it difficult to take your herbs, don't quit. Tell the herbologist. They may be able to find a different method of administration. Don't be restricted by a method of administration that you find difficult or repugnant. I've seen too many people turned off to Chinese herbs because they were forced to boil and drink them. There are many other ways to take herbs. In many cases, the key to success with herbal medicines is perseverance, so it is important to find the best way for you to take your herbs.

How to Take Your Pills

“How many pills a day do I have to take?” New patients say in disbelief, after I tell them.

“Twenty-four,” I repeat. “Why so many?” They invariably say. Herbs are different from the pharmaceuticals you’ve been used to. Most herbal pills are basically made up of ground-up roots and bark and leaves and other plant material. A good part of this is fiber, and this fiber adds significantly to the volume of the herbal medicine. Even herbal concentrates, which have been extracted from the plant’s fiber, must still be taken in much larger amounts than we are accustomed to.

But that’s only because we are accustomed to taking powerful chemicals, which are toxic in large amounts. Herbs contain only tiny amounts of these chemicals and contain many additional chemical constituents, these ingredients buffer the effects of the herbs, often making them far safer than pharmaceuticals, but also requiring larger doses.

So, if you want your herbs to work as well as drugs - or better, you’ll have to get used to taking 6 - 30 pills a day. But is that really so much? Thirty 200-gram pills only come out to 6 grams of medicine a day. That’s only about two tablespoons full. Not much when you think about it that way.

What Should You Take Your Pills With?

Most people take their pills on an empty stomach (pre-prandial) 2-3 times a day. Taking herbal meds on an empty stomach is recommended for most situations. It is said to increase absorption of medicine up to 40% over postprandial administration.

We usually recommend taking pills with warm or room temperature water. However other liquids can be used for special circumstances. For Kidney ailments, herbal pills can be taken with salt water to increase action upon the kidney. Herbs for injury are frequently taken with alcohol to better vitalize the blood, and herbs for digestive complaints can be made more digestible when taken with sweet liquids.

How to Drink Chinese Herbal Decoctions:

“If bad taste means strong medicine, you’re cured.”

Some people enjoy drinking herbal blends, but for many of us, effective doses of medicinal herbs taste bad. To make matters worse, cooking herbs can befoul your kitchen or house (or the immediate neighborhood). However, using a little common sense can make this a lot easier. Remember to always boil herbs in a pot made of ceramic or stainless steel. Never use aluminum or iron cookware to boil or heat herbs.

While cooking the herbs, open windows and doors as much as possible, ventilate the kitchen. Though your neighbors may inquire, this stops the odor from deterring you (and your family).

Remember to hold your nose when you drink your herbs (literally). This eliminates almost all of the taste.

Third, drink your herbs lukewarm or at room temperature. Hot liquids must be sipped slowly. You may not want to savor the taste, so just drink it down quickly. Cold liquids have less taste but may be hard to digest.

Fourth, chew a few raisins or place a drop of lemon juice on your tongue after swallowing to eliminate the after-taste.

Herbs usually work best when taken on an empty stomach. Allow at least a half hour after taking herbs before

eating or taking additional medicines. If you are taking pills or powders, swallow them with warm rather than cold water. This will help you digest and absorb the medicine. There are some exceptions. If your medicine proves difficult to digest, try taking it with food or after eating. Some doctors believe that formulas designed for the upper body should be taken after eating. Some medicines are best taken with other liquids such as wine (injuries or vascular problems), broth (to aid digestion of the herbs), or salt water (messenger to the kidneys).

Tinctures and Herbal Wines

Tinctures are generally alcohol extracts. However vinegar, glycerin, and other solvents are sometimes used to dissolve the chemical components and thus separate these active constituents from fibrous herbal material. Tinctures are best diluted with a small amount of water to reduce the effect of the alcohol they contain. Heating these liquids can evaporate some alcohol. Herbal wines, on the other hand, contain alcohol on purpose. These elixirs use alcohol to vitalize the blood and are especially useful for injury and for old age. We're just discovering it in the West, but the Chinese have known for a thousand years that a little wine is good for older people.

Milled powders

These are just ground up whole herbs. In Chinese medicine they are called SAN. They can be boiled, taken as tablets or steeped as a draught (teabag).

Granules (powdered)

Granules are powdered herbs that have been extracted using water as a solvent, kind of like preboiling your herbs for you. These powders are often referred to as freeze dried herbs. In fact, they are spray dried, not freeze dried. Boiled down herbal liquids are sprayed on to a watersoluble medium such as cornstarch, rice starch, or maltodextrin (sugar). This results in a powder that can be dissolved in water and drunk. Granules of individual herbs can easily be combined into formulae. Drinking granulated formulae is much quicker and easier than boiling herbal decoctions. They also won't smell up your whole house. Unfortunately, like boiled herbs, they usually taste terrible. Hold your nose when you drink. Granules have become popular in Taiwan, Japan, and the USA, but not yet in China, where people still boil their herbs most of the time.

To take granules, use as much or as little water as you like. I prefer to drink no more than a quarter of a cup of medicine, so I use a small amount steaming hot water to dissolve them. Generally, the hotter the water, the better the granules dissolve. But don't try to drink them hot. If the water is too hot, you'll be forced to sip your medicine, which you probably don't want to do. If you have any taste buds, you probably won't want to savor these herbs. So, let them cool or add a little cold water. I've learned to stir in an ice cube, giving me instant room temperature herbs without a lot of extra liquid to swallow.