



Choosing Your Medicine

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There is increasing evidence that more people in the U.S. are becoming dissatisfied with orthodox Western Medicine. The medical establishment is increasingly challenged by its failure to deal successfully with new diseases and evolving new forms of old diseases that the World Health Organization had once thought conquered. Faced with this dilemma, people are turning to “alternative medicine” for answers to their health problems. According to a recent survey, health-conscious Californians are leading the way to alternative healers and doctors. 41% of Californians have seen alternative health practitioners for treatment at least once. Insurance companies are becoming more aware that it is good business to provide coverage for these visits as a preventive measure rather than having to cover more costly medical procedures when illness has progressed further.

These alternative methods are often not new, but ancient modalities of healing that have existed for hundreds, some even thousands of years. Acupuncture, Herbology, Ayurvedic Medicine, Yoga, T'ai Chi Ch'uan, meditation, homeopathy, and massage therapy, are all methods with a longer history than modern allopathic medicine. Since 1979, when Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill making acupuncture legal in the State of California, many Californians have been steadily using this alternative medicine as their primary health care. Most recently, acupuncture needles have been reclassified by the FDA as a legitimate medical device. This means that acupuncture is now becoming more accepted as a legitimate form of medical therapy. Why are people turning to acupuncture and Chinese Medicine? How does acupuncture differ from Western Medicine? What is the scope of Chinese Medicine? When should one consider using acupuncture instead of Western Medicine?

Basic Differences between Chinese and Western Systems of Medicine

Chinese and Western Medicine are not at odds with each other. They are merely two different approaches toward healing disease. Chinese Medicine and Western Medicine deal with the human body on two entirely different levels. Western Medicine operates on the body's mechanical or physical level, while Chinese Medicine works with the body energetically. Understanding the foundations of these two approaches allows the patient to choose the most advantageous method of healing his or her particular illness. Acupuncture and Chinese herbs are based on the concept of Qi energy. Qi pervades everything, not only within the body, but throughout the entire universe. If this sounds mystical, it is because, in China, there

was never a separation between philosophy and its application to science. Chinese Medicine is built upon the concepts of Change, of Yin and Yang and of the Five Elements. These concepts are also the foundation of the great philosophies of China, based on the I Ching: Taoism and Confucianism.

According to these philosophies, the human body is just a reflection or microcosm of the Universe. It is believed that if the Qi circulating through the internal organs is in perfect balance, as it is in nature, there will be harmony and good health. However, if there is stagnation, deficiency, or excess of Qi in the body, then an environment of disharmony exists, which will result in disease. If this condition persists over a period of time, there will be some physical breakdown of the body, which a Western medical doctor would then consider to be a symptom or physical manifestation of disease. A practitioner of Chinese Medicine would treat the imbalance long before it manifested as a physical symptom. Many people consider Chinese Medicine a form of prevention, because it can treat disease when it is still in the form of an energetic imbalance, prior to developing a breakdown of the physical body.

Western Medicine is based upon science. It deals with the body on the physical rather than energetic plane. If an illness can be detected by one or more of the many tests created by Western Medicine, then it can be identified and the patient possibly cured. However, if the disease cannot be detected through a test, it can-not be treated. A Western doctor will use techniques such as blood tests, urinalysis, MRIs, X-rays, scans, electro-cardiograms, etc. to detect and identify disease.

A Chinese doctor will base diagnosis on an entirely different set of signs and symptoms, including the spirit in the eyes, the gait of a patient 's walk, the smell of the body, the condition of the tongue, the 28 different qualities of the 12 pulses, the patient's diet, lifestyle, and so on. These all reflect the Qi of the internal organs and the overall energetic condition of the patient. Often a patient will go to a doctor with no specific medical ailment other than not feeling well. The patient may undergo a battery of tests from Western Medicine with no positive results. The same patient may go to a Chinese doctor and receive a specific diagnosis such as "Wood overcoming Earth," "Liver Yang rising," or "kidney yin deficiency."

Choosing a System of Medicine

When is it best to use Chinese, and when Western Medicine? Each system has its strengths and weaknesses, its advantages and disadvantages, although there are many areas where they overlap. Western Medicine tends to be more dramatic and intensive in nature. Its procedures are often drastic and produce quick and permanent change. Chinese Medicine is neither invasive nor drastic. Its procedures are gentle and do not alter the physical body. They don't go beyond the gentle insertion of thin, hair-like needles into the body, to regulate the body's energy. Change and healing are based on the patient's own vitality. Given the differences between the two approaches, the patient should select the method that best fits the disease.

Western Medicine is very good with acute and traumatic types of injuries or when a disease has progressed to such a degree that radical and dramatic procedures are required to quickly save the life of the patient. If one has suffered traumatic injury with extensive tissue damage and loss of blood or fluids, say from an accident, or when a person has a heart attack, drastic and radical procedures may be appropriate. Often, if the injury or disease is very acute or if the disease is fast moving, a more heroic and radical a measure is needed to deal with the situation. In a life or death situation, when heroic measures are necessary, Western Medicine can work miracles.

There are, however, some unfortunate drawbacks. Radical procedures are often irreversible, and sometimes produce secondary problems. For example, Western drugs are very powerful and effective, but are also highly toxic. They can have serious side effects, including drug induced hepatitis, decreased mental acuity, loss of libido, and poor digestion, to name but a few. Chinese herbs tend to be more gentle and much less toxic. They are used in combination or formulas so that the undesirable side effects are neutralized. Western drugs also tend to have a suppressive nature. They suppress the symptoms of the disease and often reverse the healing process. We may mistakenly think that by treating the symptom we cure the disease. The symptom is not the disease, but only its external manifestation. A simple example of this is the use of cough medication. The medication stops the cough and its symptoms, but at the same time pushes the cough back into the chest, thereby prolonging the cough.

Surgery also has its disadvantages. Surgery leaves scar tissue, which obstructs the flow of energy through the body. A surgeon cutting through the body takes no account of the meridians (pathways of the Qi energy) and often slices through them, breaking the energy flow. Often there is no choice in an emergency if a life is to be saved. However, after the patient has recovered from the operation there will always be some permanent side effects. For example, many of my patients who have had abdominal surgery later experience weakened digestion because the surgery has cut through the spleen and stomach pathways creating scar tissue and obstructing the flow of Qi. (Though sometimes collateral circulation can be established.) I have found women who have had Cesarean sections to give birth will later have diminished libido and sexual energy because the kidney pathways, conception vessel and Chong vessels have been cut and scar tissue formed.

Chinese Traditional Medicine works best with chronic diseases, since its aim is to marshal the body's energy to heal itself. If a person has no specific medical complaint but just doesn't feel well, seeing an acupuncturist would be best. A generalized feeling of disease usually is a signal that the body's energy is not balanced. This could manifest as tiredness, emotional imbalance, nervousness, or general malaise. Left untreated, it might lead to acute disease and eventually a mechanical breakdown of the body. A chronic illness often has a long onset, sometimes taking years before reaching an acute stage. During this phase of onset, acupuncture and Chinese herbology are most effective. A chronic illness often

necessitates an overall modification of the patient's lifestyle and mindset to bring about a cure. Since a chronic illness takes years to develop it also takes time and a number of treatments to heal. A quick improvement can easily reverse itself. Chinese Medicine tries to establish an energetic momentum through several or frequent treatments which swings the body toward healing itself. A slow and gradual change is desirable. This is quite different from seeing a Western doctor only once or twice for treatment of a particular illness.

In Western Medicine, conditions often exist that cannot be treated until they have progressed to a certain extent. Examples of this are ovarian cysts or kidney disease. Ovarian cysts can not be operated upon until they become large enough, while dialysis or kidney transplants are not performed until the kidneys have begun to fail. But what about the valuable time period prior to this last stage, when something can be done to keep the conditions from getting worse or, better still, to reverse the disease process so that the patient can be healed? Many diseases are slow to progress. Cancer, heart disease, ulcers and the like usually develop slowly and are often a result of improper lifestyle, bad diet, too much sex, suppression of energy, and rigid attitudes. This is where Chinese Medicine is very effective.

I have a male patient who is 83 years old. He had no specific complaints except poor eye sight due to glaucoma which he had for over thirty years and feeling a little tired. After a recent physical exam his internist told him that his kidneys were very low in function. They were only operating at 18% of normal levels. There was nothing that could be done at the moment but when kidney function dropped lower he would be put on dialysis. His future was not bright since he was too old for a kidney transplant and the prospect of having weekly dialysis troubled him greatly. My job was really cut out for me. Since the patient had been evaluated prior to my treatment, and would be re-evaluated after being under my care, his progress would be a good measure of the effectiveness of my Chinese Medicine treatments. I immediately began to treat him twice a day with acupuncture and moxa to tonify his kidney yang energy. I also gave him Chinese herbs twice a day to strengthen his yang. I informed his urologist that I was treating his kidneys and obtained his approval. After two weeks of treatments, my patient returned to the urologist to be re-evaluated. The patient was subjected to three hours of tests, which included a nuclear scan of his kidneys. I was cheerfully informed that my patient's kidney function had improved to 55% of normal and that further medical attention was not required. He was happily discharged from her care.

Working Together

Because Western and Chinese Medicine are just two different modalities with the same goal, a person can often use these two approaches advantageously together, as they do in China. For example, if a patient who has cancer is treated with radiation and chemotherapy, he can also use Chinese Medicine to get rid of their toxic side effects. Chinese Medicine also works wonders in post surgical healing. It is able to breakup blood stagnation and increase the circulation for a fast recovery. In certain

mental and emotional problems where the use of medication was first necessary, acupuncture has been useful in helping the patient through the difficult periods and to eventually help to come off medication and remain psychologically well. The success of acupuncture for the treatment of addictions is well documented. Together with various detox programs, it has been a most successful therapy to help detoxify addicts, relieve pain, and free the patient from further dependence on drugs.

Chinese Medicine and T'ai Chi Ch'uan

In China, Chinese Medicine and T'ai Chi Ch'uan have been closely related for many years. This is because both are based upon the Qi energy of the body. Although T'ai Chi Ch'uan is an incredible internal martial art, most practitioners of Chinese Medicine prescribe it as a form of physical therapy and as an adjunct to their medical treatments. I often tell my patients that practicing T'ai Chi is like giving yourself an acupuncture treatment. The only difference is that doing T'ai Chi is a more general treatment for the whole body, while acupuncture or herbs tend to be for a more specific condition. Practitioners of T'ai Chi usually utilize it as a general daily "tune up". T'ai Chi is well known for its ability to maintain the body's vitality and because of its gentleness, it is a natural choice for senior citizens to increase their longevity.

Conclusion

In choosing which path to take when you are ill, it is important to understand the nature of your disease before you make a choice. Remember that Western medicine is mechanically oriented and drastic in nature. Once a procedure is done, it will most likely be irreversible. It works best with advanced stages of a disease, a quickly moving disease, or on traumatic injuries where a quick response is needed to a life threatening situation. Chinese Medicine works energetically on the body and is very effective on slow moving, or chronic, diseases. It is important to choose your medicine to fit your situation. If there is any doubt, consult with your acupuncturist to see if your situation falls within the scope of his or her medical knowledge and experience. Since few Western medical doctors are knowledgeable about Chinese Medicine, it would be difficult to get a fair perspective from them. It is important to read and study more about Chinese Medicine in order to can make an intelligent decision. You are ultimately the person who has the responsibility in making the decisions to heal yourself. The doctor can only be the guide.

Recommended Reading

The Web That Has No Weaver, by Ted J. Kaptchuk, O.M.D.; *Between Heaven and Earth: A Guide to Chinese Medicine*, by Harriet Beinfield, L.Ac. & Efrem Korngold, L. Ac., O.M.D.