

## Chinese Medicine Newsletter - January 2010

Welcome. Since pain is a common reason that people seek out acupuncture treatment, in this newsletter I want to briefly discuss some ways that pain is understood in Chinese Medicine. This is a vast subject on which I can only briefly comment in this format. Given we are in the middle of winter, the main focus will be on some types of pain that can be exacerbated this time of year.

Our system is constantly being nourished by the flow of qi (pronounced “chee”) energy through the meridians (the pathways of energy on which the acupuncture points are located). This flow of qi or energy facilitates the movement of blood and fluids. All our internal organs, muscles, sinews, etc are dependent on an unimpeded flow of this energy for nourishment. When qi energy is abundant and flowing freely, there is well-being. When this energy is either deficient or blocked, there can be ill-health.

Pain in Chinese Medicine is understood as the result of blockage or stuckness. When either qi or blood is “obstructed” there frequently will be some type of pain. How does this blockage or stagnation occur? There are several ways. One of main ways that the meridians become obstructed is by what in Chinese Medicine are called “pathogenic factors.” There are over a dozen of these listed in Chinese medical texts. This is called “Painful Obstruction Syndrome.” The most common of these “pathogenic factors” are cold, wind and damp, which also happen to be reflective of the external environment. If one of these factors or a combination of them is causing blockage and pain in the body, their presence in the environment will exacerbate the internal condition. For example, it is very common for someone who has pain as a result of “dampness obstructing the meridians” to feel worse when the weather is humid and damp. This is the classic “rheumatism” that worsens in damp conditions. Someone with a cold obstruction in the channels will likely feel more discomfort this time of year when the weather turns cold.

The etiology of these can be a direct result of exposure to damp and cold external conditions, or an internal weakness that makes us more vulnerable to these environmental factors. The Chinese are very careful about exposure to the elements. It would be extremely rare to see Chinese people in shorts playing sports in cold temperatures. Avoiding getting damp and cold is a priority. In the West we are somewhat oblivious to this. It is not uncommon in my clinical practice to see pain syndromes that are the result of such exposure either recently or from years ago, marking the onset of pain that has persisted ever since.

When these obstructions arise from internal factors they are usually the result of lifestyle choices such as improper diet, lack of exercise, insufficient rest and stress. There are foods that promote cold or damp in our bodies, thus exacerbating a “cold damp obstruction” syndrome. For example, foods that can exacerbate damp are dairy products, refined sugars, greasy or fried foods. Cold and damp are also exacerbated by cold temperature food, such as ice cream. Also, raw and uncooked foods, such as salads are also considered cold in nature. Now, obviously this is a matter of moderation. Clearly, there are health benefits at times to eating raw foods such as salads, particularly in the warmer months. However, if someone is already suffering from a cold condition internally, then overuse of salads would be ill advised and probably difficult for them to digest. As you well know, Chinese food is almost always cooked, making it warmer in nature and

thus more easily digested.

When a person has pain due to cold, damp obstruction, the acupuncture treatment is to unblock the channels, improve circulation of qi and blood and thus resolve pain. Chinese herbal medicine also uses warming and drying herbs to assist in resolving the obstruction. Eating warming foods would assist the healing. Dietary changes could be very important in creating the conditions in the body so damp and cold would not accumulate.

On an emotional level, repeated instances of frustration and irritation can eventually cause the qi to stagnate, contributing to pain syndromes. Headaches, for example, can be caused by pathogenic factors as already discussed, as well as from repeated emotional stress that causes the energy pathways (meridians) to constrict, or excess energy to collect in the head. Other pain syndromes, such as dysmenorrhea or painful periods can obviously be the result of stress as well as from hormonal imbalance. Muscular-skeletal pains can sometimes be the result of long standing emotional trauma.

As a final note, it is important to remember that the nature of pain is not static or fixed. In Chinese Medicine pain is seen as the energetic resistance to the unimpeded flow of qi. In this sense, there is no such thing as strictly “objective pain.” Pain is the combination of sensation and our relationship to it, the story with which we interpret the sensation. It is the reflection of our “resistance” to sensation. Thus, it is always to some degree “subjective”. That does not make it unreal or imaginary, but allows for an empowered approach where conscious awareness plays a crucial role in the self-management and healing of pain.

Another way to say this is that there is the sensory experience of pain or discomfort. Separate from that is the “suffering” that we experience as a result of our subjective response to the sensation. We can become more aware of the “stories” with which we surround our pain. Maybe we are prone to disaster scenarios, imagining the worst, or feeling sorry for ourselves, or blaming something or someone for the pain we are in. These stories, as well as creating emotional turmoil, actually exacerbate the physical experience of pain. With this perspective, treatment is geared not just to easing the “physical” pain, but also in assisting one to be present to their pain in a completely different way where self awareness plays a vital role.

Enjoy the month and stay warm. For those of you that enjoy baths, here is something you can try if experiencing any aches and pains that are exacerbated by cold and relieved by warmth. Ginger is a warming herb. Slice a few inch piece of ginger into slices about the width of a quarter. Put them in a pot with about a gallon of water and bring to a boil for 10 minutes. Strain off the ginger, fill a hot bath and add the pot of ginger “tea.” This will increase the heat of the bath and add a penetrating warmth that enhances circulation and helps relieve pain.

Take care,  
Bob