

Chinese Herbal Medicine

by Damian Carey



Chinese Herbal Medicine treats the underlying cause of health problems by focusing on strengthening the body's ability to maintain internal balance and heal itself. This is achieved by treating every patient's individual pattern of disharmony. Treating these patterns of disharmony makes Chinese herbal therapy especially successful with disorders where the cause and mechanism is not fully known to modern medicine. Disorders that manifest in complex syndromes (e.g. Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) or disorders with multiple causes and complex mechanisms, like many chronic disorders, can also be treated successfully.

History

The individual herbs and herbal formulae used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) have been developed over five thousand years of clinical practice. That's a lot of history. It was the personal research of the emperor Shen Nong (3737 - 3697 BC) that led to the first Classic Materia Medica. This original work included 360 individual herbs. Shen Nong's research was carried on throughout succeeding generations of researchers and practitioners until the modern era. Today's Chinese Medicine Pharmacopeia includes over 5,000 medicinals which may be animal, plant or mineral products.

Classifying Herbs

The full range of medicinals are commonly referred to as herbs for simplicity. Each of these are classified according to their nature, action, flavour, preparation, dosage, indications and contra-indications. The nature of an individual medicinal may be hot, warm, cool or cold. Its flavour will be one of the five classic flavours: bitter, acrid, sour, salty and sweet, corresponding to the principle of the Five Phases. Medicinals can also be classified by their ability to effect particular Organs. Finally, medicinals are often described as having synergistic or antagonistic relationships with other medicinals.

Herbal Formulae

Up to twenty individual herbs may be blended together to create a single formula with its own unique characteristics and action. When constructing a formula, close attention is paid to the manner in which individual herb characteristics will blend with each of the others. As such the formula will have an integrated and balanced character of its own. The most common herbal formulae have a long history, many of them have been in use for thousands of years. However a good herbalist will frequently modify a formula, adding additional ingredients or subtracting others to suit a particular individual.



Chinese Herbal Medicine Today

In modern China, 80% of all TCM patients are treated primarily with herbal medicine, with the remaining 20% treated with acupuncture. In Western countries this proportion tends to be reversed. However, the education of TCM practitioners in both Chinese Herbal Medicine and acupuncture is proceeding at a rapid rate in the West. This in turn is spearheading a surge in popularity of these highly effective modalities as more and more experienced practitioners are making their presence felt in the marketplace.



Ultimately there will be a full integration of TCM and Western Medicine in countries such as Australia with each retaining their own qualities and principles but also complementing and enhancing the efficacy of each other.

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