

# *Liver Yang Rising*

## Treating pain with Traditional Chinese Medicine

By Kate Kent, Dipl. Ac., C.H. (NCCAOM)

I found her hunched over holding her head in my waiting room. She had called for an emergency treatment – a young mother of four who suffered from debilitating headaches. I had to laugh because during the assessment, still holding her head, she weakly pointed to a funky new bag I had just bought and was rather pleased with and whispered “nice bag”. I knew she was going to be ok.

But pain is no laughing matter. Millions of people suffer pain at some point in their lives – some on a daily basis. Like my patient, it can take the form of debilitating headaches or menstrual pain, injury from trauma and, as the baby boomers slide into their late 50s and 60s, arthritic pain.

We can be grateful for the vast array of drugs that are available to ease the suffering, but prolonged use of these drugs can cause problems of their own and do not get to the underlying cause.



In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) pain can be treated successfully with acupuncture and herbs. The premise of TCM is one of flow and balance – flow of Qi and Blood and balance of Yin and Yang – so we see the pain as a blockage known as a Qi Syndrome. In TCM the kind of pain indicates a lot to the practitioner. For example, if the pain is dull, we look for a deficiency in Blood or Qi; severe pain leads us to ask about Cold in the body; a sharp, stabbing and fixed pain is most likely Blood Stasis and a throbbing pain with a feeling of irritability and insomnia could be Liver Yang rising (too much Heat in the head). If there is swelling and heaviness with the pain, it is probably Damp invasion and this may turn to Heat or be of a Cold nature. When Damp or Cold is involved, rainy weather will often bring on a heavy, dull type of pain.

In TCM looking at the tongue and taking the pulse is like opening a book of the body. It tells us a great deal about the general health of the patient and the cause of the pain. So, with these tools, the practitioner, like a sleuth, makes a thorough assessment and comes up with a treatment plan. Once the assessment is accomplished, tiny, disposable needles are inserted into acupuncture points (I think of them as little Esso stations of Qi) to move the blockage, strengthen the body’s defensive mechanism and balance the whole system.

A good way to describe this is to think of a traffic jam where tempers are beginning to fray. Along comes the ambulance (the needle) and moves what is blocking the flow, enabling the traffic to move freely again. These needles are not painful, but actually cause a sensation of deep relaxation and most of my patients fall asleep. I find herbs a useful adjunct to a treatment because they continue the work of the needles. They have no side effects and are gentler on the system than drugs. Depending on the severity

and duration of the pain, three to 10 treatments is about average. However, if a patient has suffered years of pain, treatments may take longer.

Very rarely does pain, except that of trauma, occur on its own. Often there will be an underlying cause of disharmony in the body that needs to be addressed and diet plays a large part in recovery. In general, patients suffering from dampness and cold, should avoid greasy type foods, salads and cold drinks as these create more dampness and will make the problem worse. If the concern is a pounding headache that feels hot, then the patient should avoid hot spicy foods and alcohol.

A patient once described her pain to me as something that, “eats you up, takes up space in your head and takes over your life.” It is not necessary to live on pain killers or to suffer pain. TCM has been around for thousands of years and is an excellent and safe way to treat this problem.

*Kate Kent, Dipl. Ac., C.H, NCCAOM, is the acupuncture and Chinese Herb Program Director at the Shiatsu School of Canada, where she also teaches. She has appeared numerous times on TV and radio, given talks, written many articles and a book on Chinese medicine. She has been in private practice in Toronto since 1985. For an appointment call 416-466-5849.*

*Published in Your Health Source, August 2006*