

Creating Natural Synergy

The multiple benefits of acupuncture

As acupuncture and oriental medicine continue to gain acceptance in the west, they are increasingly being used in conjunction with western conventional medicine to treat a range of conditions, including cancer. Acupuncture in particular has received much attention for its use in cancer pain and post-operative and chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting (D. Chiaramonte & L. Lao, 2010).

The American Cancer Society (ACS) for the treatment of cancer and treatment-related symptoms has recommended acupuncture use in cancer patients. Pain, nausea, breathlessness, vasomotor symptoms and limb edema have all been found to respond to this treatment modality (American Cancer Society).

Acupuncture can act against carcinogens (factors attributable to cancer development) through its ability to reduce stress and enhance immune function. Indeed, several cancer centers have begun incorporating acupuncture for treating cancer-related symptoms such as pain and many patients have had significant results in the reduction of their symptoms (D. Chiaramonte & L. Lao., 2010).

Before describing how acupuncture can be effectively integrated into the care of the patient, it may be helpful to first gain an appreciation of what cancer is and the various western conventional therapies that are often used in its treatment (National Cancer Institute).

What is cancer?

As one of the leading causes of death in North America, cancer is a disease that few can ignore. It arises from abnormal changes in the genetic make-up of cells that cause them to multiply uncontrollably. The abnormal cells then spread locally or to other regions of the body via the lymphatic or blood circulation. Several factors are believed to trigger the cell mutations that give rise to cancer. These include hereditary susceptibility, immune dysfunction, increasing age, improper dietary intake, extreme stress, hormonal therapy and environmental, infectious, and therapeutic carcinogens (agents that are associated with cancer development) (American Cancer Society).

Conventional treatment

Common cancer therapies include surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, Immunotherapy, and hormonal therapy (National Cancer Institute). While surgery involves the physical

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removal of tumors, other treatments such as chemotherapy work on inhibiting cell growth and multiplication. All these therapies can be very effective and are often critical components to helping a patient survive. Removing tumors through surgery and radiation can prevent further metastases (cancer spread to other areas of the body) and complications. Unfortunately, these and other treatments can be very difficult for the body to process and recover from (UCLA Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center). Several of the drugs used in chemotherapy are not only toxic to cancer cells but to healthy cells as well and can cause mild to severe bouts of nausea. By depleting the bone marrow and thus inhibiting the production of white blood cells, red blood cells, and platelet cells, chemotherapies can increase a person's risk of infection, cause fatigue and dizziness, and impair wound healing respectively (M.A. Richardson, T. Sanders, J.L. Palmer, A. Greisinger & S.E. Singletary., 2000). Furthermore, chemotherapeutic agents can cause hair loss and skin rashes from damage to the cells of the hair follicles and skin. Hormonal drugs such as tamoxifen (used in the treatment of breast cancer), have also been shown to increase the risk of thrombosis (blood clotting) and endometrial cancer (UCLA Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center).

Therapies such as gamma knife radiotherapy and cyberknife involve focused radiation to a particular part of the body and are sometimes offered as an alternative to surgery. In addition, newer chemotherapeutic drugs promise less toxicity and fewer side effects than ever before (M.A. Richardson, T. Sanders, J.L. Palmer, A. Greisinger & S.E. Singletary., 2000).

These advances are indeed encouraging. So where does acupuncture and oriental medicine fit in?

Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which consists of acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, tuina (Chinese massage therapy), nutrition, counseling, and physical exercise (such as Tai Qi and Qi Gong), is a comprehensive medical system based on over three thousand years of experience. The earliest drawings of tumors have been found on turtle shells and "oracle bones" from the eleventh century B.C. Texts dating from 200 B.C. have detailed descriptions of the quality of tumors and their cause (D. Chiamonte & L. Lao., 2010).

Similar to conventional western medicine, TCM attributes cancer to one or a combination of factors such as genetics, lifestyle, and environment. Cancer is the accumulation of external or internal factors or both, that create disharmony in the normal functioning of the body, and combine to produce a diseased state. In ancient texts, it was believed that factors such as extreme cold and intense sadness could

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also lead to unhealthy conditions such as cancer. When treating patients, the TCM physician takes a complete inventory of the person and considers such things as musculoskeletal abnormalities, energy level, body temperature, complexion, sleep, appetite, diet, digestive functioning, emotions, and overall lifestyle (D.M. Eisenberg, R.B. Davis, & S.L. Ettner. et al., 1998).

The traditional Chinese medicinal treatment of cancer is based on the principle of *fu zheng gu ben*. Roughly speaking, fu zheng means strengthening what is correct, the qi, the forces in the body regulating normal healthy development. Gu ben refers to strengthening and enhancing the processes of regeneration and repair, which Chinese medicine locates in the kidney. Traditional treatment includes removing toxins that may contribute to cancer, increasing the flow of blood and qi, removing undesirable accumulations of tissue that are the tumor, and restoring self-regulation and balance among the jing, shen, and qi. The means that are used - acupuncture, herbal and nutritional therapies, tai chi, qi gong, tui na, and counseling - are each designed to further one or more aspects of this process (F. Capra., 1998).

Acupuncture for various stages of cancer

For conditions where the cancer is detected early, acupuncture can maintain and promote the normal functioning of the body. Several studies done primarily on animals have shown its ability to boost the immune system and encourage the growth of healthy functioning cells. This could be important for counteracting the result of radiation and chemotherapy that tend to attack both normal and abnormal cells. An additional benefit of acupuncture is that it can induce a state of deep calm and relaxation and alleviate physical and emotional tensions (D. Chiaramonte & L. Lao., 2010).

In cases where a tumor has formed, acupuncture can be used pre- and post-operatively where appropriate as an adjuvant therapy to surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy. According to a study done by Poulain (1997) on 250 patients who underwent gynecological surgery for cancer, acupuncture was shown to speed recovery time. A recent study done by Aldridge (2001) on a series of 40 breast cancer patients, found that acupuncture could reduce nausea and vomiting following surgery and significantly reduce post-operative pain (L. Conrad, M. Neve, V. Nutton V, R. Porter, A. Wear., 2000).

For advanced stages of cancer, acupuncture can be used in conjunction with other forms of palliative care to significantly reduce the sensation of pain. In some cases, patients may be able to reduce the dosage of pain medication substantially and thereby avoid the harsh side effects that are often associated with them (D. Chiaramonte & L. Lao., 2010).

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How does acupuncture work? The eastern and western explanations

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the body is composed of an intricate web of energy pathways known as "meridians". The twelve regular and eight extra meridians help to maintain a balance of yin (substances which nourish the body) and yang (related to activity and function) within the body. Each meridian is named after the specific internal organ that it encompasses and through which it passes. Through these meridians, the internal and external aspects of the body are connected (T. Kaptchuk., 2000).

When "qi" (vital energy) and "xue" (blood) flow freely through the meridians, the body is in good health and can perform at its optimum. However, if a particular energy pathway does not function properly, the flow of "qi" and "xue" can become obstructed, hyperactive (excessive), hypoactive (deficient) or even flow in reverse. This can affect the function of the meridian's corresponding organs, which causes an imbalance of the body's yin and yang, and ultimately affects the functioning of the body as a whole (J. Huang., 1995).

From a TCM perspective, acupuncture stimulates specific points on the body where energy collects and flows through the meridians and regulates the overall flow of energy so that the body can return to a state of balance and health (W. Tsui., 1992).

From a western medical perspective, the insertion of hair-fine sterile and disposable needles into the subcutaneous layers of the skin can have profound influences on several regulatory systems. When used correctly, acupuncture has neurophysiological effects that can release pain-reducing endorphins; affect the metabolism of serotonin, a neurotransmitter (brain chemical) that affects both pain perception and mood; and improve circulation and immune function. Acupuncture specifically works to relieve nausea by releasing chemicals that control the vomiting centre in the brain as well as decreasing acid secretion and inhibiting abnormal gastric contractions (L. Conrad, M. Neve, V. Nutton, R. Porter, A. Wear., 2000).

Many acupuncture points are also palpably detectable hollows or anatomical tissue planes, which in Western theory, may signify easily influenced zones of lymphaticoneurovascular bundles in the subcutaneous tissue. Peripheral endings of cranial and spinal nerves, and penetrations of neurovascular bundles through superficial fascia, have been cited as morphological findings of acupuncture points (L. Conrad, M. Neve, V. Nutton, R. Porter, A. Wear., 2000).

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What to expect from an acupuncture treatment

The insertion of needles under the skin might not sound appealing, but the reality is that the fine needles cause little discomfort or pain since they are inserted below the skin layer. Once the needles are inserted, patients may feel a dull, heavy sensation accompanied by a slight tingling or numbness in the local area of insertion, that usually dissipates within a few moments. The needles are then retained for approximately twenty minutes. Most people find this experience to be quite relaxing and some may even fall asleep (J. Huang.,1995).

After the acupuncture session, the practitioner may also use other modalities such as tuina (Chinese massage therapy) to complete the treatment. For chronic conditions such as cancer, treatments will be regular (at least once or twice a week) and adjusted according to the particular condition a person is in (P. Unschuld., 1995).

Conclusion

Cancer is not a death sentence. It is a life-changing experience not only for those who have it, but for others as well. Educating ourselves as to what options are available for treatment and overall healing can only improve our opportunities to live a healthier and happier life.

From providing adjuvant therapy for pain and associated emotional aspects relating to cancer, to treating side-effects such as nausea and decreased immunity arising from the more toxic and invasive conventional treatments, acupuncture and oriental medicine are invaluable resources that can guide the body towards a healthier state.

The current medical system in the west comes from a background of reductionism, where we reduce a person to the sum of their body parts. This means that when treating a patient, there is a tendency to deal with the parts rather than the whole. The focus in health care has in large part been on treatment rather than prevention. While these views have their place, a more pronounced shift towards prevention, treating the whole person, and allowing an individual's natural healing abilities to take part in the healing process which is necessary if we truly want to promote health. Here is where the integration of eastern with western medicine can truly make a difference.

References

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