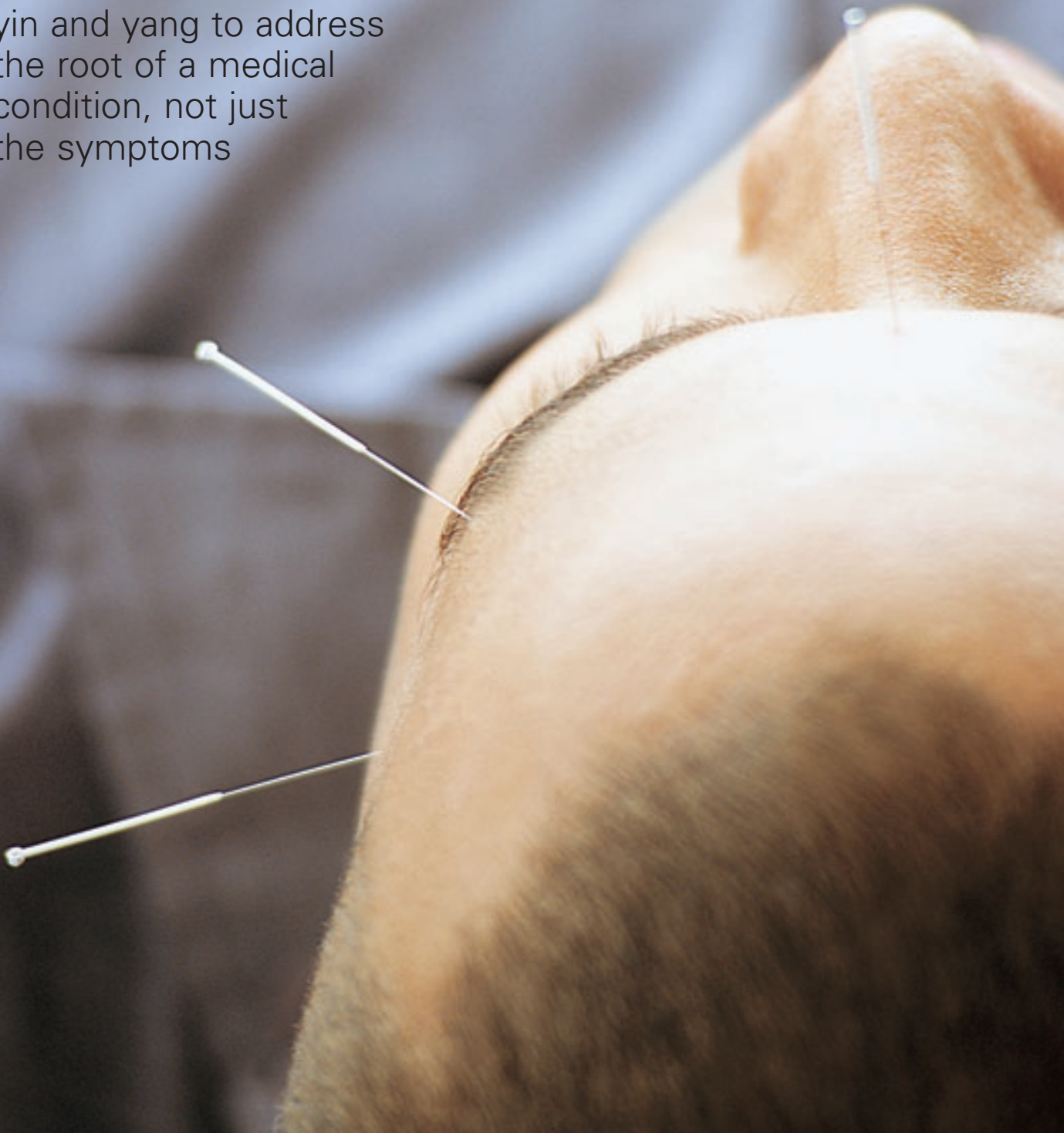


Chinese Checkup

Traditional Chinese
Medicine balances
yin and yang to address
the root of a medical
condition, not just
the symptoms



By Matthew Solan

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) may be more than 2,000 years old, but for most Americans it only dates back to 1971. That's when *New York Times* reporter James Reston had to have an emergency appendectomy while he was in China to cover President Nixon's historic trip. Afterwards, the Chinese doctors who tended Reston gave him acupuncture treatments for the pain, and he was surprised by his quick recovery. Inspired, Reston wrote about his experience with TCM, which fascinated American readers. Since then, it has become a more accepted alternative medical practice that millions of American have explored.

Many turn to TCM because they are either looking for an alternative to Western medicine or because there *are* no alternatives. People may suffer from an ailment such as migraines, where standard medicine no longer works, or they seek relief from regular treatments like chemotherapy or its potential side effects, or want a more natural approach to medicine free of pharmaceuticals and surgery. Other times, it's simply because Western doctors are at a loss for what to do. "Often Western medicine can't offer relief from many everyday nagging or vague problems like bloating or trouble sleeping," says Harriet Beinfield, LAc, co-owner of Chinese Medicine Works in San Francisco and co-author of *Between Heaven and Earth: A Guide to Chinese Medicine* (Ballantine Books, 1991). "TCM can help not only treat the problem, but find out why it occurs in the first place, so it doesn't happen again."

A Balanced Approach

A magazine article can't fully explain the detailed inner workings of an ancient medical system. But here's the basic concept of how Traditional Chinese Medicine works.

First, TCM is a complete medical practice—

from diagnosis to treatment and prevention. Its philosophy is rooted in the balance of yin and yang—which are defined as opposing energy forces such as earth and heaven, winter and summer, and rest and activity, according to Beinfield. When yin and yang are in balance, you feel relaxed and energized. Out of balance, ying and yang can affect your health and cause illness, ailments, and disease.

To keep yin and yang in synch, you need free flowing qi (pronounced *chee*), the force that animates life in everyone. "Qi gives you the capacity to move, think, feel, and work," says Beinfield. Illness results when there's too little or too much qi in one of the body's energy pathways (called meridians), or when the flow is blocked. "So the ultimate goal of TCM is to balance the yin and yang in your life by promoting the natural flow of qi," she explains.

TCM also asserts that the body is divided into five functional systems called Organ Networks, which include Liver, Heart, Spleen, Lung, and Kidney.

These networks govern particular tissues, mental faculties, and physical activities by regulating qi. For instance, the Kidney Network does more than manage fluid metabolism, it stores the "Essence" responsible for reproduction, growth, and regeneration, according to Beinfield. "It controls your teeth, bones, brain, pupils, and lumbar region," she says. "It is also associated with fear and the capacity for sharp thinking and perception. So problems such as infertility, low back pain, paranoia, fuzzy thinking, weak vision, or despair are viewed as dysfunctions of the Kidney Network." In this case, a TCM practitioner works to balance the Kidney Network to stabilize its qi. Here's a look at the other Networks:

The Heart: It not only pumps blood through the body, but also influences the mind and protects the spirit. Symptoms of an agitated Heart Network include anxiety, restless sleep, angina, and palpitations.

The Spleen: Its main job is assimilation of food, fluids, and even ideas. An out-of-balance Spleen Network often results in indigestion, bloating, fatigue, or poor concentration.



What Can TCM Treat?

TCM has successfully been used to treat or heal almost every kind of ailment, illness, and disease. It can help soothe everyday problems like insomnia and headaches and the various symptoms and side effects related to severe conditions like diabetes, chronic pain, HIV, and cancer. The following is just a sample of what science has discovered in the past year:

Asthma: A review of clinical trials by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City concluded that specialized Chinese herbal formulas were effective in treating asthma.

Diabetes: Chinese researches recently found that Chinese herbal medicine helped 80 percent of type 2 diabetes patients with symptom relief compared with a placebo group.

Chemotherapy: A study in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* (June 2006) discovered that acupuncture stimulation of the P6 acupuncture point, located four centimeters up the arm from the wrist, helped chemotherapy patients with post-treatment nausea and vomiting.

Insomnia: Chinese scientists found that TCM herbs were more effective in treating insomnia and the symptoms of lethargy than the Western drug eszopiclone in 63 cases of senile dyssomnia—sleep disorders among elderly adults.

Low Back Pain: Acupressure massage reduced chronic low back pain in terms of disability and severity for six months in 129 patients, according to the *British Medical Journal* (March 25, 2006)

Osteoarthritis: A recent study by German researchers found that acupuncture treatments eased the pain of patients with knee osteoarthritis better than standard physiotherapy.

How to Find a TCM Practitioner

The following organizations can help you locate a nearby TCM practitioner, clinic, acupuncturist, or Chinese herbalist:

The American Association of Oriental Medicine
www.aom.org

The Institute of Traditional Medicine
www.itmonline.org

The National Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance
www.acuall.org

Acupuncture.com
www.acupuncture.com

The National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine
www.nccaom.org

The Liver: The Liver is responsible for the even flow of both qi and temperament. An upset Liver translates to neck and shoulder tension, high blood pressure, headaches, cramping, moodiness, and/or impulsive behavior.

The Lung: The Lung uses the breath to set the body's rhythm and provide inspiration. A troubled Lung Network can cause tightness in the chest, skin rashes, vulnerability to colds, or melancholy.

East vs. West

Another way to understand TCM's philosophy is how it compares with conventional Western medicine in terms of identifying problems and solutions. "Western medicine identifies symptoms through a diagnosis of the body, which includes an examination of symptoms and then possibly blood tests, x-rays, or scans. Doctors then match the problem with the best-known treatments," says Isaac Eliaz, MD, LAc, director of the Amitabha Medical Clinic and Healing Center in Sebastopol, California, which integrates both Western medicine and TCM. "It's a very A+B=C approach. You have these symptoms, which mean you have this problem, and here's the possible cure."

Yet Western doctors often don't take into account the individual, says Eliaz. "As a result, while that treatment may be what Western medicine believes offers the most concrete evidence for curing the ailment, it may not be right for that person," he says. "This explains why some patients get worse because of the treatment itself or due to side effects."

In comparison, TCM takes a whole body approach and examines the person as a microorganism, says Eliaz. TCM doctors look at the person's constitution—the health of certain body parts and one's overall well-being—as well as personal information including age, profession, and even the climate where a person lives. "The goal is to obtain as much data about that person as possible beyond their physical symptoms to determine the exact cause of their ailment," says Eliaz.

Practitioners use all this information to prescribe a treatment unique to that person. So even if two people have the same complaints, their treatments may be entirely different.

TCM also embraces the importance of patient participation. "How open he or she is to treatment helps influence the rate of success," says Eliaz. Much of Western medicine is built around skepticism and doubt about certain treatment and diagnosis of ailments, and so often that attitude is transferred to the patient. It's difficult to heal if you, as the doctor, doubt that it will."

The Three Faces of a TCM Doctor

TCM practitioners play three different roles in treating a patient. There's the ordinary doctor who examines you and determines your ailment; the expert who recommends specific treatments to correct the problem; and finally the sage, whose role is to interact with the patient and get him or her on the path to healing. The sage may be the most important of the three, says Eliaz. "The role is similar to the classic family doctor who builds a solid relationship and path of communication with patients that strengthens their bond and helps the patient be more receptive of treatment."

Of course no two TCM specialists are the same. Each has his or her personal approach to diagnosis and treatment. "It's like going to a bakery," says Beinfield. "A German bakery offers different selections than, say, a French one."

Still, the overall approach remains constant. A typical TCM visit begins with the practitioner asking questions about your problem and symptoms and looks for signs of qi imbalance. He or she then observes you to determine your constitution, says Beinfield, and examines the condition and color of your skin, tongue, hair, eyes, nails, etc. "This tells the practitioner how the Organ Networks are functioning and what their dynamic interactions are," she says. Your past complaints, work and living habits, physical environment, family health history, emotional life, and even the sound of your voice (to assess your *shen*, or spirit) are also taken into account.

From this detailed analysis, the practitioner can determine if one or more of your organ networks are affected. For example, say a woman has pale lips, brittle hair, and dry tongue. This suggests a blood and moisture deficiency, which undermines the function of the Liver, Heart, and Spleen Networks, says Beinfield. Her complaints may be that she feels tense, anxious, and irritable, and has trouble with chronic fatigue, depression, or insomnia. The practitioner then tries to correct the Network imbalances with a combination of therapies. Again, the goal of treatment is to balance yin and yang, which is achieved by regulating the qi in the Organ Networks.

TCM uses a variety of therapies. The most common include acupuncture, acupressure massage, herbal remedies, and moxibustion. Duration of treatment depends on the nature of the complaint, its severity, and how long it has been present, says Eliaz. Here's a summary of each therapy.

Acupuncture: Thin needles are inserted into various acupuncture points to stimulate and mobi-


lize the flow of qi. The points lie among the 14 major pathways that navigate through the body from the top of your head to the tips of your fingers and toes. Acupuncture also promotes proper function of the muscles, nerves, vessels, glands, and organs.

Herbal remedies: Chinese herbs and herbal formulas assist the Organ Networks to help perform their tasks, says Beinfield. For example, particular herbs enhance the capacity of the Heart to propel blood and soothe the mind, and the Liver to maintain resilient emotions. Some herbal formulas are designed to address specific ailments like allergies, cramps, or inflammation.

Acupressure massage: A therapist manually stimulates various acupuncture points by applying pressure with the fingertips. "The massage works to further promote the flow of qi," says Beinfield. The stimulation of a single point can last anywhere from 30 seconds to five minutes or longer, depending on the individual.

Moxibustion: A form of heat therapy where dried mugwort is burned over an inflamed area on the body. The mugwort is tightly rolled up and then wrapped in paper to resemble a cigar-sized stick. The stick is then lit and, while it burns, the practitioner rotates it either in circles above the area or repeatedly touches it (of course, being careful not to burn your skin). Moxibustion is often used to treat cold or stagnant conditions.

TCM practitioners also examine your diet to determine if changes need to be made. "For example, bloating is a sign of Spleen Network weakness, which may be related to an intolerance to wheat or dairy," says Beinfield. TCM also emphasizes a body-and-mind connection as part of treatment. "By treating the mind, you improve the body, and vice versa," says Eliaz. It's common for TCM doctors to recommend mind-calming practices as part of your overall treatment, including meditation, yoga, or qigong.

Don't think you have to choose TCM over Western medicine. The two are not necessarily a substitute for each other. In fact, TCM is often used as a complement to conventional treatment to help fill the gaps of Western medicine. But if you are searching for a more natural and holistic approach to medical care, TCM may be just what the doctor ordered. 

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