

Traditional Chinese Medicine and diabetes

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Years of research into the causes of diabetes and its progression, has highlighted the complex nature of the disease. It has a multitude of possible causes and of interlinking complex biochemical imbalances that continue its effects. Consequently, the conventional medical approach of using insulin or other drugs to treat diabetes, where lifestyle/diet changes are not enough, sometimes does not fully protect the person from long-term, life-threatening complications arising.

This is what makes the approach of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to disease so relevant. It takes a holistic view of disease, rooted in each individual's own emotions, physiology and lifestyle. Any treatment is tailored to suit each person's uniqueness. The TCM prescription can range from acupuncture treatments, dietary and exercise advice, to massage and herbs. Although TCM sprang from a philosophical and cultural tradition dating back over 2,000 years in China, its ideas have been continually updated and adapted to reflect the needs of today's modern patient.

Conventional medicine can benefit from the more holistic and integrated view of disease presented by TCM and indeed the increasing acceptance of fields like psychoneuroimmunology point to a limited convergence of specialisms rather than compartmentalisation of disease. However it is this individual approach to treatment by TCM that makes it so difficult to research, contradictory to a Western reductionist view of disease, and so therefore, kept largely to the fringes of medicine. This article explores the TCM view of diabetes, research into its effectiveness and gives examples of the type of advice that a person with diabetes may encounter when receiving treatment.

Diabetes Mellitus is called tang niao bing or sugar urine disease in Chinese Medicine, although the clinical manifestations have been categorised as a disorder under the name xiao ke or 'wasting and thirsting'. The classic text of TCM, the Huang-di Nei-jing or Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor is the source of all Chinese Medical theory and was published between 300 to 100 BCE. Even then, over 2,000 years ago, the text noted that overeating of sweets and



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fats, emotional stress, weakness of the organs and obesity are all considered related to the disease (Flaws 2002). Factors now routinely considered in devising a Western treatment protocol for a patient with diabetes.

The practitioner of Chinese Medicine uses a vast array of diagnostic tools to build a complete physiological and psychological picture of their patient and their interwoven relationships. A pattern of disharmony is described and a treatment framework is configured to restore balance and harmony to the individual. Highly technical instruments and tests are not used, but the practitioner relies instead on touch (by palpation), smell, feeling the pulse, minute observation (voice quality, tongue, posture, colour and moisture of skin, gait and demeanour etc) and questioning.

Kaptchuk in his classic text on TCM describes this process as, "based on the idea that no single part of a disease is an isolate symptom or occurrence, and can only be understood in relation to its whole". A set of symptoms will be placed in the patient's entire behavioural patterns and lifestyle, so symptoms become a part of each individual and not a separate label. A person is never a diabetic, but rather someone with a set of symptoms denoting a pattern of disharmony. This prosaic and complex diagnostic and treatment approach renders the application of research methods devised for the testing of

Western interventions, such as drugs, challenging. The goal of achieving standardisation, with replicability of method and outcomes runs counter-intuitive to the TCM customised approach. By trying to fit TCM into our doctrines of medicine, do we then lose something of its essence.

Existing research performed in China over the last 50 years is largely dismissed as much of it lacked control groups, or too few participants were involved. However while undoubtedly some of the research lacked rigour, this criticism can be often levelled at Western research, which rely on notions of statistical confidence, to infer reliability of results. It is often years later that the consequences of a particular medical intervention come to light, having not been detected by the initial research, or a closer examination of the research, reveals flawed assumptions made in the methodology. The research in China seems to offer tantalising glimpses of new possibilities of using TCM *alongside* Western medicine, and perhaps the findings are worthy of more investigation here.

Chinese research suggests that when TCM is used in tandem with conventional medicine the best results are obtained for treating diabetes and include:

a) Improving the therapeutic efficacy of Western medications.

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