Chinese and Western Medicines Combined in Cancer Treatment

How Does TCM Assist in Cancer Treatment?

The suffering of chemotherapy patients has long been an issue among western doctors. Although the treatment is technically sound and produces satisfactory results, the side-effects, particularly among patients undergoing heavy treatment, can be agonizing. The basic principle of chemotherapy is to kill both the cancerous and non-cancerous cells, hence it is often accompanied by such side-effects as vomiting, lipotrichia, canker sores, and a decrease in both red and white blood cells.

In addition, radio therapy is not suitable for all kinds of cancer. Some cancer cells are not too sensitive to radio waves, and some are even immune. Chinese herbs can actually perform two roles in the treatment of cancer. As well as minimizing the patient's pain, some herbs can actually increase the sensitivity of radio therapy, hence making the treatment more effective.

Theoretically speaking, if the cancerous region is in an area dense in veins and oxygen, it will generally be more sensitive to radio waves. Certain Chinese herbs can increase blood flow by enlarging the blood vessels, hence improving the patient's response to radio therapy. The most effective Chinese herbs for this purpose have already been decocted into an effective composite, comprising leech, Eupolyphagaseu Steleophaga, rhizoma sparganii, curcuma zedoary, Ophiopogon japonicus, ligusticum wallichii, Salvia root, noto-ginseng root, tricosanthes root, and gletisia thorn. This decoction not only affects blood flow to enhance radio therapy, but also kills some cancer cells at the same time.

Most cancer patients lose their vitality during treatment, and there are Chinese herbs that can help them to combat such feelings of lethargy. Such herbs include Astragalus mongholicus, Adenophora (南沙参), Ovate Atractylodes (白术), Cordyceps sinensis (冬蔘草), Cornus (山茱萸), tricosanthes root, Asparagus Tuber (天門冬), tortoise plastron (龜板), Polygonum multiflorum (何首烏), Asini Corii Gelatinum (阿膠), raw rhizome of rehmannia (生熟地), Sculellaria barbata (半枝莲), hedychotis herba (白花蛇舌草), Lili bulbus (百合), and radix peucedani (前胡).
now looking for an ideal location within Hong Kong, and plan to have at least two clinically experienced doctors, along with a professorship and several assistant posts. Operational costs of the Center will be paid for by charity donations.

Doctors from mainland China are preferred, since the application of western and Chinese medicine to cancer patients is fairly well established in China already, especially in Beijing and Guangzhou. The doctors should therefore have a degree of experience in this area. There will be no consultation fees, although patients will of course have to purchase their own Chinese herbs from Chinese medical halls.

It is hoped that the Center might signify a milestone in the coming together of Chinese and western medicines, but not everyone is convinced. Dr. Shao Zude (邵祖德), President of the Hong Kong Society of Chemotherapy for Oncology, agreed that Chinese herbs are able to improve patients’ appetites and reduce vomiting. Nevertheless, he raised the issue that the status of Chinese physicians, still a matter of debate in Hong Kong, remained a handicap. The Hong Kong Medical Society seemed equally reserved about the Center, citing the reason that it has not yet been clearly established which herbs are effective in treating cancer and which are not.

Despite all this, it would appear that TCM’s credibility can only improve from the establishment of the Center. In the wake of many other positive changes to have taken place in Hong Kong recently in relation to TCM, advocates of Chinese medical science must surely be encouraged.

How the Specific Treatments Work

According to the view of Chinese medical science, the main side-effects of radiotherapy will be dryness and a lack of energy. Different patients react to the treatment in different ways, and indeed not all forms of radiotherapy treatment are the same. However, most patients’ symptoms can be grouped into fairly distinct groups. Listed below are the standard treatments for some of the more common side-effects:

1. For radiotherapy treatment around the neck area, patients often suffer such complaints as hyperemia, hydroncus, ulcers or excessive thirst. For the less seriously affected, a mixture of herbs such as ophiopogon (麦冬) sterculia scaphigerum (肿大), Lonicerae Flos (金银花) and liquorice (甘草) can relieve the uneasiness. Patients affected more seriously may need to try a mixture of herbs such as subprostrate sophora (山豆根), Radix Trichosanthis (天花粉), Coptis (黄连), Linicerae Flos (金银花), Asparagi Tuber (天冬), ophiopogon (麦冬) and Arctii Fructus (决明子).

2. Depending on the dosage of the radiotherapy being undertaken, patients generally feel to be run down, experiencing such symptoms as dry skin, thirst, constipation and lack of strength. Herbs such as dried rhizome of rehmannia (生地), radix scrophularia (玄参), ophiopogon (麦冬), Adenophora stricta (花粉), rhizoma phragmitis (沙参), Dendrobiun nobile (石斛), tortoise plastron (鳖板) and tricgosanthes root (蓋根) can promote the secretion of bodily fluids and saliva, and replenish the body’s vital essence. In treating patients, doctors should prescribe herbs in accordance with specific conditions.

3. Radio waves can destroy both white and red blood cells and blood platelets. As a result, patients may demonstrate symptoms such as anemia, lack of strength, drowsiness, weakening of the pulse, etc. Clinical trials have shown that two decoctions, known colloquially as the ‘Chinese Four Agent’ (四物湯) and ‘Perfect Major Supplementation’ (十全大補湯) decoctions, can help to combat the lowering of the white blood cell level. A mixture of codonopsis root (黨参), astralagus (北芪), Angelicae sinesis (當歸), Polygonum multiflorum (何首烏), cooked rehmannia root, milletia root (熟地) and stem, lycium fruit, jujube and Asini Corii Gelatinum, can help to nourish patients whose blood cells have been reduced.