What Can Kampo Drugs Be Used For?

Kampo medicine has been practised in Japan, China and other East Asian countries since the ancient times. It was originally based on theories and concepts which are quite different from those of Western medicine. Recently, however, the efficiency and usefulness of Kampo drugs have been recognized even by Western-educated clinicians in many countries throughout the world. Moreover, many of these physicians now prescribe Kampo medicine, and its efficacy in medical applications is highly evaluated in Japan. In fact, from 2002, the study of Kampo medicine has been included as a compulsory item in medical education in Japan. Unfortunately, however, Kampo drugs are still seldom utilized and are less highly evaluated in Western countries, partly due to the fact that these drugs are made up of multiple components and its pharmacological effects are vague and not specifically understood in some cases.

It is important to note, however, that some kinds of Kampo drugs have rather specific and direct effects on certain pathological problems and diseases. For example, Gan-Cao-Tang, known in the Western world as licorice, has a mineralocorticoid-like effect for diuresis and has been generally used in Western as well as Eastern countries. Moreover, there is another Kampo drug to be noted. It is Shao-Yao-Gan-Cao-Tang (Japanese name: Shakuyaku-kanzo-to). This traditional Kampo medicine consists of equal amounts of peony and licorice roots, and has been used in Japan and China for muscle pain or skeletal muscle tremors for a long time. It is also well known to nephrologists that muscle cramps are one of the most common complications in patients on hemodialysis. To relieve and prevent the cramping pain, Shao-Yao-Gan-Cao-Tang has been used in such patients and has become increasingly popular in Japan. Some papers on its beneficial effects have already been published in English language journals. In the near future, it is believed that Shao-Yao-Gan-Cao-Tang’s popularity will spread from Asia to the United States and Europe.

There are other similar examples. Wu-Ling-San (Japanese name: Gorei-san) has an anti-headache effect in patients who are very sensitive to change in atmospheric pressure and consequently suffer from headaches. Wu-Ling-San is considered to improve the distribution of surplus water and lessen headaches in some specific cases. Recently, this Kampo medicine is also used to treat nuchal discomfort and shoulder stiffness especially in business men and women who use computers regularly. Fang-Yi-Huang-Qi-Tang (Japanese name: Boi-ogi-to) has a significant effect on arthralgia and is often used as a
supplementary or alternative treatment in patients with gonarthrosis. Besides these Kampo medicines, there are others which have easily understandable effects on specific symptoms and pathological conditions.

As for the clinical practice of Kampo drugs, it is most important not to think of these drugs as mysterious Oriental agents but to try them without inhibition. Fortunately, Kampo drugs rarely have serious adverse effects; even then, such effects if any have been well recognized because they have been applied in practice for a very long time in China, Japan, Korea and in some other countries. In the case of Japan, the use of Kampo medicine is accepted by the public medical insurance system, and about 70% of physicians are using some form of Kampo medicine. And in the US, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has decided to support the research of compound herbal medicines (Kampo medicines). Finally, it must be emphasized that the use of Kampo drugs can likely reduce medical expenses.

Kampo drugs are both natural and beneficial to human health and well-being. Therefore, physicians are encouraged to show a keen interest in their applications and attempt to use them more readily in daily practice.

Reference