

Sample material - GERIATRIC ACUPUNCTURE

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Introduction

It has been said that you can tell a lot about a society by the way it treats its elderly. While most the developed world has seen great advances in modern medicine's ability to extend life in the later years, these very advances have created a whole new class of medical conditions modern medicine is ill-equipped to deal with. In generations past, it was common for people to work hard their "whole lives" in robust health and then perish in their 60s and 70s after a heart attack, stroke, or complications of such conditions as diabetes, pneumonia, or cancer. Now days, millions of people who suffer heart attacks or strokes, or contract conditions like diabetes or cancer, live well into their 80s or even 90s. And while we can hail modern medicine's advances as extending the quantity of individual lives, many of those individuals suffer tremendously in the quality of their remaining years. Be it from intractable pain, the consequences of the breakdown of physical and mental function, or the emotional stress of experiencing this happening while inching toward the end of one's life, the swelling ranks of the "infirm elderly" are presenting great challenges to modern society.

Unfortunately, the powerful drugs, surgery, and other techniques modern medicine has developed to snatch life out of the jaws of death often prove ineffective for safely managing the suffering the survivors of those heroics are left to contend with. Chinese medicine and especially acupuncture, while not so effective as a method for saving lives hanging by a thread, is often better suited to safely improve the quality of life in many elderly sufferers.

Acupuncture stimulates and facilitates the best use of the body's natural resources, helping the body to better manage a wide range of disorders. Because acupuncture relies on natural, intrinsic resources, it is safer than manmade pharmaceuticals and surgery. This superior safety profile is especially important in the management of geriatric patients as the shock of surgery may be too great and that patient group tends to have a lower tolerance for the side-effects of pharmaceuticals. Older patients are also often taking multiple prescription and non-prescription drugs. Being able to safely manage specific disorders and on-going quality of life issues without piling new drugs on top of those already being taken is especially clinically valuable in geriatric medicine.

When I first opened my practice in 1986, I was unaware that the area I had settled in supported a number of retirement facilities. Some of my first patients were residents of these facilities - those desperate enough to try acupuncture from this freshly minted blue-eyed Acupuncturist. Fortunately, I was able to help those first few older patients and word began to spread throughout these retirement facilities. I soon found myself with a small but growing patient-load at least half of which were geriatric patients. While I had seen a few older patients in my school's clinic, I had not had any specialized

training in “Geriatric Acupuncture” as there were no textbooks on this subject in English and, to the best of my knowledge, this is still the case as I write this in 2013. While this course is not intended to serve as a textbook, I will try to share some of what I learned by trial and error in my 27 years in practice in which elderly patients have continued to make-up nearly half of my caseload.

I have chosen to use the terms “geriatric”, “older” , and “elderly” somewhat interchangeably throughout this lesson as I find all these terms have nuances to recommend them. Whatever term is used, it is of course not intended to suggest these patients with fall within any sort of stereotype. While there are some general shared physical characteristics within different geriatric age groups, the emotional, physiological, and spiritual characteristics of older patients are as varied as any adult demographic if not more so. Don’t forget this. There can be a tendency among younger adult caregivers to see the elderly as sweet, little-old grandmas or cantankerous grandpas. Older individuals were once younger individuals with the full range of different personalities, passions, and accomplishments who happened to survive into their later years and now find themselves struggling with the inevitable decline we will all experience should we live so long. Don’t patronize. Follow the Golden Rule of treating them as you would hope to be treated if and when you find yourself in their position. The elderly in need of healthcare frequently suffer a range of indignities so please keep their dignity as a top priority in the care you give.

I don’t mean to preach here but no adequate lesson on caring for the elderly could overemphasize what a critical role bedside manner plays. When you have treated enough once proud, physically vigorous, professionally accomplished elderly men or women, now shrunken and incontinent and seeking a measure of relief from their pain or other problems, you will know what I am talking about. In no other age group can the qi you radiate carry a greater significance in the patient’s emotional well- being.

A Growing Demographic

Currently in the U.S. there are some 40 million people over age 65 and that number is expected to double by the year 2050. While improved nutrition and public health measures has allowed more people to enjoy better health into their later years than had been the case in generations past, we are also seeing a greater number of geriatric patients who survive well into their 80’s, 90’s and beyond in greatly compromised health as mentioned above. When you consider the alarming epidemic of obesity in younger adults and children, the future tend is actually one of huge populations of people surviving longer than in the past but with an even greater number of complex, multiple chronic health challenges.

Taoist Philosophy in Geriatrics

It is quite interesting to consider that the oldest and most significant Chinese medical Classic – the so-called “Yellow Emperor’s Classic” (YEC) opens with the Yellow Emperor asking his court physician a question related to geriatrics. He states that in ancient times people lived past 100 years of age and now are worn-out at half at age and he asks his physician why that should be. In short, he is told that the

people had “lost the Tao” i.e., their connection with nature. The YEC is full of references to Taoist concepts so a brief summary of these concepts as they relate to aging is fitting here.

Taoist philosophy teaches that the concept of yin/yang is the most essential to understanding nature. One of the “Laws” of yin/yang is that everything must have an opposite. A fundamental application of the law of opposites is that all things that are born (created) must die (perish). So aging leading to death is the inevitable flip-side of creation leading to conception and birth. More specifically, life is the combination and interaction of Fire/yang/shen and Water/yin/jing essences (qi). Fire qi relates to the heavens above us and Water qi to the earth below us. It is the nature of Fire to rise upwards and of Water to flow downwards. Life is the interaction or intermingling of the Fire and Water essences but, as their tendencies are to move in opposite directions, they will eventually disassociate in “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” fashion.

In terms of our physical (material) bodies, Water or yin/jing qi is our most vital essence. We are literally born within a fluid-filled environment of the womb and are replete with Water qi in our early years. Our physical aging process can well be thought of as a “drying-out” process - we continually lose our Water essence as we age. Our skin, hair, joints, internal organs and glands - all dry-out as we age. Reproduction takes a heavy toll on this Water essence as you can't get something out of nothing in the material realm (although Taoism teaches that the material realm itself is generated from its opposite non-material partner).

At the other end of the spectrum, our Fire or yang/shen qi blazes upward as spiritual/mental energy. As this essence continues its separation from the Water essence this causes mental/emotional disturbances including excessive thoughts, memory loss, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and mental