

East Meets West

By Richard Esquivel, L.Ac., MTCM

This is the third in a series of articles designed to educate the public on Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Diagnosis in Chinese Medicine

Determining the cause of a disease requires a systematic diagnosis and differentiation of presenting symptoms. As to be expected, both the diagnostic process and the treatment strategies are consistent with the pathogenic model. Without the benefit of modern laboratory tests or diagnostic imaging capability, the ancient Chinese physicians were able to discern and treat the acute symptoms and chronic root cause of all diseases afflicting their patients. Some present-day practitioners do use modern diagnostic tests as an adjunct to the Chinese diagnostic method, including myself. However, the challenge remains to sort through presenting complaints and symptoms and laboratory and diagnostic imaging, to determine the most likely cause of a problem. To this end sophisticated diagnostic routines are applied, consisting of inquiry; observation and inspection; auscultation (listening) and olfaction (smelling); and palpation of the body and pulses. Information gathered via the latter three methods is used to confirm the suspected disease profile determined by the inquiry phase of the diagnosis.

Inquiry

Most important in the diagnostic process is questioning the patient about their chief complaint and associated conditions, including the onset of the problem and its history. The patient's status, profession, residence, lifestyle, habits, emotion, and environmental exposures are also taken into account. Medical history forms are used to obtain information to assist the practitioner during the inquiry process. The inquiry follows a systematic plan involving a standard group of questions to focus on the chief complaint of the patient. A wide range of topics is used and the practitioner is not restricted in what questions are asked. These may include inquiries about the presence of chills and fever; presence or absence of sweating; eating, drinking and substance-use habits; frequency and quality of defecation and urination; nature and location of pain or possible impairment; sleeping patterns; menses, leukorrhea, and obstetric history for women; state of stress and emotional strain; physical activities; and medical history, surgical events, present medication use, and previous injuries.

Inspection and Observation

This aspect of diagnosis involves detecting abnormal changes by visually observing the patient's vitality, color, appearance, body size and structure, movement and posture, and secretions and excretions. With respect to vitality, observation is made to the patient's eyes and energy level. Observation of color involves coloration and luster of the face, body regions, secretions and excretions, and tongue body and coating. Inspection of the tongue involves examination of the tongue body, size, shape, color, and the presence or absence of coat and coloration.

Auscultation and Olfaction (Listening and Smelling)

In ancient times, auscultation involved detecting and noting certain characteristic sounds that are related to specific organs, and involved attention to speech, respiration and cough. Speech is evaluated in terms of loudness and coherence. Respiration is evaluated for strength and consistency. The quality and characteristics of any cough are also observed and noted.

Palpation and Articulation

Palpation is a method of physical diagnosis in which pathological conditions are detected by feeling and gently pressing along specific areas of the body. Some conditions of the internal organs or referred pain can be ascertained. The body surface is examined to determine sites of sensitivity, temperature variations, lumps and masses, abnormalities in the internal organs, abnormal muscle contractions or knots, and response at painful regions. Palpation proceeds from the localized source of the problem out to the extremity associated with the affected area. Articulation involves movement of the joints, whether assisted or not by the practitioner, to assess the functional status of the muscles. Range of motion and ease of articulation are evaluated. The strength of specific muscles, as well as reflex activity, can be determined. Specific diagnosis is performed to differentiate between certain musculoskeletal conditions, and the nature and degree of pain associated with joint movement is also noted.

Feeling the pulses at the wrist location of the radial artery is an important part of the palpation method. The pulse is measured while observing the breathing. The rate of the pulse is observed, as well as the strength, the width, the depth, the firmness, and the relative quality of the pulse. Classically, there are 28 different pulse images or qualities. Due to the subjective nature of pulse-taking, dedicated practice is needed to develop a high level of proficiency.

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The following article in this series will address the differentiation of syndromes in Chinese medicine and describe a typical exam and treatment.