

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE (TCM) IS OFTEN viewed as difficult to understand and results are seldom based on actual studies. However this is changing and the use of TCM for health maintenance and treatment is increasing, and there is also a plethora of studies to compare the effects of TCM and western medicine.

Two years ago when the opportunity presented for me to take up a diploma course in acupuncture that was tailored specially for registered medical doctors, I decided to take the plunge and started on a journey of discovery. It was initially difficult to understand and accept the TCM explanation of diseases as it seems completely contrary to western medicine.

As we progressed through the course, I was enlightened when I realised that the TCM theories were formulated by the physicians after prolonged period of observation. As doctors we can appreciate what is the medical problem equivalent of the TCM condition and therefore can look at how the same condition is treated by the TCM physicians and by doctors.

TCM treatments of herbal medicine and acupuncture have shown to increase the success rate of pregnancy when used in combination with medical treatment. In my own clinical practice, I find that patients with sub-fertility problem have many causes and many will conceive after we treat the underlying condition. However there will be some who still do not conceive, even after undergoing assisted procedures like intra-uterine insemination and in-vitro fertilization. I will then suggest that they consult a TCM physician and see if they require any treatment to improve their body condition. I have had many patients who have benefited from this combination of western and Chinese medicines. Previously when patients say that the TCM physician told them that their womb is cold or that their kidney is weak, I would be as puzzled as they were. But now I can explain what that means to the patients and they find that quite reassuring as some of them think that they have renal impairment when they are told their kidney is weak, and they are happy to know that TCM attributes many functions like reproduction, growth, bone formation to the kidney and therefore when the kidney is weak these functions may be deficient and therefore treatment will involve tonifying the kidney.

Acupuncture can be used to treat many conditions, however it usually requires many sessions and often patients do not have the time or patience to complete the treatment course. Besides, the majority of my patients have a fear of needles and that would exclude any acupuncture treatment. Breech presentation at term occurs in about three percent of pregnancies and they need to be delivered operatively by Caesarean section. In TCM practice, moxibustion which involves burning a moxa (Mugwort) stick at an acupoint (Zhiyin) located at the outer corner of the nail on the little toe has been found to increase fetal movements thus increasing the rate of fetuses turning to cephalic position. However the results from many studies have been mixed and the more studies will be needed to determine the effectiveness, safety and acceptability of the procedure.

Many Chinese herbs contain active ingredients which have similar properties as

A DOCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

our medicines, therefore it is imperative that you always tell your doctor and TCM physician what medicines you are taking otherwise you may end up with problems resulting from the combined exaggerated effect.

A lot of people think that Chinese medicines are safe and harmless as they are herbal in nature, but many herbs can be harmful if taken inappropriately. If they are taken over a long period of time, regular monitoring of the liver and kidney function is necessary as all herbs are eliminated from the body via these two organs. They may like any other medicines affect the functions of these organs or in the event that the functions of these organs were already impaired, the medicine may not be eliminated appropriately and end up accumulating in the body resulting in toxic effects. For western medicine, we have more information regarding the potential side effects of the drugs we use and therefore will ensure that we monitor for them.

TCM treatments tend to be very specific depending on the body's condition at that point in time and all of us have different body constitution depending on our age, gender, diet and lifestyle habits, therefore just like how one consults a doctor for diagnosis and treatment, one should consult the TCM physician for treatment and not just take the same herb or tonic that worked for another person.

TCM is often called alternative therapy as there used to be distinct groups of patients who will only take TCM and resists western medicine and vice versa. I am glad that is changing, and after learning more about TCM, I find that western medicine and TCM are complimentary in many ways and by combining them, we will have a greater range of treatments to benefit the patients. ■