

Management of Migraine Using Traditional Chinese Medicine

by Dan Jiang

Typical case study and analysis

Mrs L. M., 56 years old, had been suffering from recurrent left-sided migraines for more than 20 years, and first came to the clinic on May 24th, 2000. Originally, she had only had two or three episodes a year, often prior to her period, but gradually the migraines had increased in severity and frequency, and over the last two years were occurring two or three times a month. Each migraine lasted for one to four days, and could only be controlled by taking one or two Sumatriptan tablets.

A hysterectomy had been carried out ten years ago, following the discovery of uterine myomata which had resulted in heavy periods. After the hysterectomy, she had received hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for eight years. In recent years, she had not had any periods or suffered from hot flushes, sweating or any other menopausal symptoms, and in the last two years she has not needed to take any HRT.

Two years ago she returned to her teaching job after a period of retirement. However, the pressure of her work had made her feel increasingly stressed, depressed, fatigued and nervous, and she experienced increasingly frequent and intense tension headaches. These dull headaches were persistent and severe and covered the whole head, with additional stiffness and soreness of the neck. She could not find any method of relieving them and they eventually developed into left-sided migraines accompanied by other symptoms such as throbbing of the blood vessels in the temples and behind the ears, pressure and catarrh in the nose and discomfort in the left eye. Most recently, the tension headaches had appeared up to two or three times per week, and on occasions they would persist for two weeks, eventually developing into a migraine. Ordinary analgesics had no effect and, as antimigraine medication cannot be taken in excess, she sought help from TCM.

Presenting symptoms

A persistent, dull headache of two weeks' duration which covered the whole head and was worsened by stress. Although it had not developed into a full-blown migraine, she was feeling some discomfort in her left eye (with visual

disturbance) and her nose, as well as fatigue. She said she was easily upset and angry, and complained of insomnia, irritability, depression and involuntary food cravings in the afternoon. Her bowel movements were frequent. Her tongue was pale red with a thin white coating and her pulse was wiry and fine.

General medical examination

Pale, puffy complexion with pained expression. Normal vision in both eyes without horizontal nystagmus or pathological reflexes. MRI scans showed no sign of brain tumour.

Conventional medical diagnosis

Multiple headaches: currently tension headache, with a history of left-sided migraine headaches.

Analysis of symptoms by traditional Chinese medicine (TCM)

Stagnation of Liver qi (tension headache, worsened by stress, and depression) produced Liver heat (easily upset, irritability and anger, insomnia) which transferred to the Spleen and Stomach (involuntary food cravings). Although there were signs of Liver and Kidney yin deficiency, for example the fine and wiry pulse, I decided in the first phase of treatment to concentrate on excess as the primary factor.

Treatment plan

Stage 1: Soothe the Liver, clear Liver and Stomach heat, and relieve headache by moving qi.

Stage 2 (when the acute symptoms were basically controlled): Soothe the Liver to alleviate depression and move qi to free stagnation preventing further migraine.

Stage 1

The first visit

Acupuncture: Baihui DU-20, Zanzhu BL-2, Taiyang (M-HN-9), Fengchi GB-20, Waiguan SJ-5, Zulinqi GB-41, Hegu L.I.-4, Taichong LIV-3.

Chinese Herbs: Chai Hu (Radix Bupleuri) 10g, Zhi Shi

(Fructus Citri seu Ponciri Immaturus), 10g, Qiang Huo (Rhizoma et Radix Notopterygii) 10g, Chuan Xiong (Radix Ligustici Wallichii) 10g, Yan Hu Suo (Rhizoma Corydalis Yanhusuo) 10g, Bai Zhi (Radix Angelicae) 6g, Bai Shao (Radix Paeoniae Lactiflorae) 10g, Chi Shao (Radix Paeoniae Rubrae) 10g, Dang Gui (Radix Angelicae Sinensis) 10g, Mu Dan Pi (Cortex Moutan Radicis) 10g, Zhi Zi (Fructus Gardeniae Jasminoidis) 6g, Zhi Gan Cao (Radix Glycyrrhizae Praeparatae) 5g.

Five bags, each bag to be decocted for one and a half hours and taken twice daily.

The second visit (after one week)

After acupuncture, the headache lessened significantly, the visual disturbance disappeared completely and there had been no development of migraine.

The acupuncture treatment was then repeated weekly. No more decoctions were prescribed, and instead two patent formulas were given: *Jiu Wei Qiang Huo Wan* (Nine-Herb Pill with Notopterygium) and *Yan Hu Zhi Tong Jiao Nong* (Corydalis Relieve Pain Capsules) [consisting of Yan Hu Suo (Rhizoma Corydalis Yanhusuo) and Bai Zhi (Radix Angelicae)], 10-15 pills of each, twice daily.

After five weeks

There had been no recurrence of migraines. She had occasionally experienced a slight, dull tension headache at the front of the head which had been fully controlled by ordinary analgesics.

Stage 2

Acupuncture: Baihui DU-20 Taiyang (M-HN-9), Fengchi GB-20, Waiguan SJ-5, Zulinqi GB-41, Zhaohai KID-6, Taichong LIV-3. Treatment was given fortnightly.

Chinese patent herbs: *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan* (Added Ingredients Free and Relaxed Pill) and *Yan Hu Zhi Tong Jiao Nong* (Corydalis Relieve Pain Capsules), 10-15 pills of each twice daily.

The above treatment continued for three months. The patient did not suffer from any more tension headaches or migraines. Her emotions were calm and stable, and her bowel movements were regular, as was her sleep. She was able to manage two to three full days at work every week. The patient was very satisfied with the treatment and to prevent a recurrence she decided to continue with the treatment for a while to consolidate the success.

Analysis

This patient began suffering from migraines in her thirties and they had continued for 20 years. Initially, they were likely to have been triggered by overwork and stress resulting in Liver qi stagnation accompanied by blood stasis. But since she was young and physically fit at this age, the pattern was characterised by excess without deficiency.

Following a hysterectomy ten years ago, she would normally be expected to have shown symptoms of Liver

and Kidney yin deficiency, but, as is commonly the case, these were masked by the HRT and had only appeared in the last two years following cessation of the HRT.

Because of the Liver and Kidney yin deficiency, the Liver was not adequately nourished, and this, in combination with the increased stress of returning to work, had worsened the qi stagnation. When the qi stagnation transformed to Liver fire, both the migraines and the tension headaches became more frequent and intense. Poor nourishment of the Liver increased her visual disturbance, and stagnant Liver heat imparted to the Stomach and Spleen caused the food cravings. Despite her symptoms, as well as the signs of underlying deficiency, this patient's general condition was quite good and so when the normal flow of Liver qi and blood was restored, she made a remarkable recovery.

Explanation of acupuncture treatment

In general, the acupuncture treatment of headaches combines treatment of the affected channels with treatment of the underlying disharmony.

Baihui DU-20 was the main acupuncture point for regulating qi in general. I combined this with Waiguan SJ-5 and Zulinqi GB-41, the confluent points of the Yang Linking (Yang Wei) and Girdling (Dai) vessels respectively, to assist the movement of qi in general, and the free flow of Liver qi in particular, as well as to free shaoyang channel. Fengchi GB-20, Taiyang (M-HN-9) and Zanzhu BL-2 relieved wind and heat from the top of the body. Hegu L.I.-4 cleared heat from the Stomach channel, thus clearing pathogenic qi from the face and head. Taichong LIV-3 further restored the smooth flow of Liver qi.

During the second stage of treatment, the procedure continued much as before, apart from the removal of Hegu L.I.-4, and the addition of Zhaohai KID-6 to nourish Kidney yin and thus assist the free-going function of the Liver.

Explanation of Chinese herbal medicine treatment

During the first stage of treatment, *Xiao Yao San* (Rambling Powder) was chosen as a base formula for promoting the smooth flow of Liver qi. Chai Hu (Radix Bupleuri) and Zhi Shi (Fructus Citri seu Ponciri Immaturus) were the main herbs prescribed for resolving stagnant Liver qi. Qiang Huo (Rhizoma et Radix Notopterygii) and Bai Zhi (Radix Angelicae) treated wind in the upper part of the body. Chuan Xiong (Radix Ligustici Wallichii) and Yan Hu Suo (Rhizoma Corydalis Yanhusuo) resolved blood stasis, whilst the combination of Bai Zhi and Yan Hu Suo comprises *Yan Hu Zhi Tong Jiao Nong* (Corydalis Relieve Pain Capsules) which can help relieve pain in headache. Bai Shao (Radix Paeoniae Lactiflorae) and Dang Gui (Radix Angelicae Sinensis) nourished blood and eased the Liver. Chi Shao (Radix Paeoniae Rubrae) and Mu Dan Pi (Cortex Moutan Radicis) cooled blood and cleared heat. Zhi Zi (Fructus Gardeniae Jasminoidis) was added to clear heat from the upper part of the body. Zhi Gan Cao (Radix Glycyrrhizae Praeparatae) harmonised all the above

herbs and protected the Stomach. Because this formula was well suited to this case, the tension headaches and migraine responded well. The consequence of this was that patent herbs could then be prescribed.

Jiu Wei Qiang Huo Wan (Nine-Herb Pill with Notopterygium) consisting of Qiang Huo (Rhizoma et Radix Notopterygii), Fang Feng (Radix Ledebouriae Sesloidis), Cang Zhu (Rhizoma Atractylodis), Xi Xin (Herba Asari cum Radice), Chuan Xiong (Radix Ligustici Wallichii), Bai Zhi (Radix Angelicae), Huang Qin (Radix Scutellariae Baicalensis), Sheng Di Huang (Radix Rehmanniae Glutinosae) and Gan Cao (Radix Glycyrrhizae Uralensis), was used every alternate week to treat pain in taiyang channel (stiffness and soreness of the neck).

During the secondary stage, *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan* [Added Ingredients Free and Relaxed Pill, Great Wall Brand = *Xiao Yao Wan* plus Yi Mu Cao (Herba Leonuri Heterophylli), Mu Dan Pi (Cortex Moutan Radicis) and Zhi Zi (Fructus Gardeniae Jasminoidis)] and *Yan Hu Zhi Tong Jiao Nong* (Corydalis Relieve Pain Capsules) were used.

Not only did the migraine cease but the tension headaches gradually disappeared too, and the menopausal symptoms (irritability and insomnia) were well controlled owing to the Liver qi moving smoothly.

Differentiation of patterns and treatment by Chinese medicine

Migraine is one of the most commonly treated diseases in the UK, particularly because it responds well to acupuncture and Chinese medicine. When diagnosed and treated correctly, it is possible to cure the patient.

My approach to treating migraine emphasises combining treatment of its main characteristics, with treatment according to differentiation of patterns.

Main characteristics of migraine

Migraine manifests as a headache which lasts from four to 72 hours, is throbbing, moderate to severe in intensity and unilateral. It may be caused by vasoconstriction in the arterial blood flow of the brain and scalp. All headaches in Chinese medicine are pathologically related to qi stagnation and blood stasis.

According to these characteristics, I select Taiyang (M-HN-9) and Fengchi GB-20 as the main acupuncture points, and Chuan Xiong (Radix Ligustici Wallichii) and Bai Zhi (Radix Angelicae) as the main herbs.

Differentiation of migraine patterns

1. Exterior wind-cold accumulation

Here, the migraine is triggered by allergic factors and/or neck injury, or by attack of exterior wind and cold.

Clinical manifestations

- Catarrh and blocked nose with clear nasal discharge.
- Neck tension.

- Visual disturbance followed by migraine which is characterised by a persistent dull aching and throbbing, or an intense, sharp pain which begins in the neck or occipital region.
- The tongue is pale or light red with a thin white coating, and the pulse is floating and wiry.

Treatment

Acupuncture: main points [Taiyang (M-HN-9) and Fengchi GB-20] combined with Yintang (M-HN-3), Hegu L.I.-4, Baihui DU-20, Zusanli ST-36 and Taichong LIV-3.

Herbal medicine: *Jiu Wei Qiang Huo Tang* (Nine-Herb Decoction with Notopterygium) combined with *Chuan Xiong Cha Tiao San* (Ligusticum Chuanxiong Powder to be Taken with Green Tea)

2. Liver qi stagnation/Liver wind agitating within

This pattern of migraine is triggered by stress, depression, a bad mood or overwork.

Clinical manifestations

- Migraine occurs at the temple (may change sides).
- Visual disturbance.
- Emotional upset, irritability.
- Tension headache at the forehead or the crown of the head.
- The tongue is light red with a thin, white coating, and the pulse is wiry.
- In cases of dizziness and numbness of the arms or tingling in the fingers, complication by Liver wind is diagnosed.

Treatment

Acupuncture: Taiyang (M-HN-9) and Fengchi GB-20 combined with Baihui DU-20, Taichong LIV-3, Xingjian LIV-2, Waiguan SJ-5, Zulinqi GB-41.

Herbal medicine: *Zheng Tian Wan* (Rectify Heaven Pills) and *Yan Hu Zhi Tong Jiao Nong* (Corydalis Relieve Pain Capsules).

Notes

Stagnant Liver qi easily affects the Stomach and Spleen. When it overacts on the Stomach it normally gives rise to excess in the Stomach, and when it overacts on the Spleen, it normally gives rise to deficiency of the Spleen. However, when Liver qi stagnation transforms to Liver fire, the fire can transmit to the Spleen and can give rise to symptoms such as abnormal food cravings with abdominal distention and indigestion. When prolonged stagnation of Liver qi, and its transformation into Liver fire, damage Liver yin and blood, internal Liver wind can be generated.

To meet the needs of each of the above conditions, the appropriate herbal medicine should be chosen:

- If Spleen stagnation manifests with abdominal distension and constipation etc. *Shu Gan Wan* (Dredge Liver Pill) should be selected.

- If, however, Spleen deficiency is manifested as abdominal distension with diarrhoea, tiredness and depression, *Xiao Yao Wan* (Free and Relaxed Pills) should be chosen.
- When the condition is associated with internal heat in the Liver and Spleen, manifesting with headache, difficulty in sleeping or easily disturbed sleep, facial acne, and early and heavy periods, then *Jia Wei Xiao Yao San* (Augmented Rambling Powder) should be prescribed.
- Where the condition is associated with internal Liver wind manifesting with dizziness and numbness, *Tian Ma Wan* (Gastrodia Pill) should be selected.
- In the case of panic attacks, palpitations and throbbing in the heart or abdomen, *Chai Hu Long Gu Mu Li Wan* (Bupleurum, Dragon Bone, Oyster Shell Pills) is appropriate.

3. Qi stagnation and blood stasis

This type of migraine lasts for a prolonged period, or there have been recurrent regular attacks for a long time.

Clinical manifestations

- Intense, throbbing headache that occurs more than once a week or lasts for over 24 hours without remission.
- There is a strong association with premenstrual tension, or the headache appears around the time of menstruation.
- The tongue is either light or dark red, with a thin white coating, and the pulse is wiry or wiry and tight.

Treatment

Acupuncture: Taiyang (M-HN-9) and Fengchi GB-20 (Taiyang should be needled horizontally through to Xuanli GB-6), combined with Tongziliao GB-1, Yifeng SJ-17, Fengchi GB-20, Yanglingquan GB-34, Qihai REN-6 and Taichong LIV-3. Scalp acupuncture in the vision and vertigo/hearing areas should be used if necessary.

Herbal medicine: *Shu Gan Wan* (Dredge Liver Pill), *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan* (Added Ingredients Free and Relaxed Pills), *Xiao Yao Wan* (Free and Relaxed Pills), *Yan Hu Zhi Tong Jiao Nong* (Corydalis Relieve Pain Capsules), *Xue Fu Zhu Yu Wan* (Blood Mansion Drive Out Stasis Pills).

4. Liver and Kidney yin deficiency with qi stagnation and blood stasis

In this pattern, the migraine will show a long history of recurrent, regular attacks appearing at, or aggravated around, the time of the menopause.

Clinical manifestations

- The migraine may be accompanied by hot flushes, irritability, insomnia, tinnitus and lower back pain.
- The tongue is red to deep red with very little or no coating, and the pulse is wiry and/or fine.

Treatment

Acupuncture: Taiyang (M-HN-9) and Fengchi GB-20 plus Guanyuan REN-4, Qihai REN-6, Neiguan P-6, Gongsun

SP-4, Lieque LU-7, Zhaohai KID-6, Ganshu BL-18, Shenshu BL-23.

Herbal medicine: *Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan* (Anemarrhena, Phellodendron and Rehmannia Pill) and *Geng Nian An Wan* (Menopause Comfort Pill) can treat the underlying deficiency, and *Yan Hu Zhi Tong Jiao Nong* (Corydalis Relieve Pain Capsules) and *Xue Fu Zhu Yu Wan* (Blood Mansion Drive Out Stasis Pills) can move qi stagnation and blood stasis to relieve pain.

General treatment considerations

In general, simple and moderate migraine can be relieved by patent herbs, indeed it is possible that the condition can be completely controlled in this way. When the clinical manifestations are more complex, for example migraine aggravated by menopausal syndrome, abdominal distention or constipation, patent herbs are less appropriate, and concentrated herbal powders should be chosen. Patients visiting the clinic at the time of a severe attack, should be treated with electroacupuncture and herbal decoctions.

Combined application of traditional Chinese therapies

The main shortcoming of traditional therapies is the weakness of their treatment power. We should therefore consider combining acupuncture, herbal medicine and other related therapies to reinforce and maximise the clinical effects. At the same time we have to consider the financial capacity of the patient to fund such treatment, and arrange an appropriate frequency of visits. Below are examples of the combined application of traditional Chinese therapies in the treatment of migraine.

1. Acupuncture and patent herbal medicine

- Mild to moderate migraine occurring every month, often associated with the menstrual cycle.
- Migraine accompanied by stress, whiplash injury or disease of the cervical spine.
- Migraine accompanied by premenstrual syndrome and/or menopause.

2. Acupuncture only

- Comparatively mild migraine, with a decreasing incidence of attacks.
- The patient is receiving another type of complementary therapy which is not completely successful, e.g. chiropractic, homoeopathy etc.

3. Herbal medicine only (decoction, concentrated powders or patent pills)

This will often be appropriate when the patient has tried acupuncture but is not convinced it is working, or is frightened by the needles, or when their choice is limited due to financial constraints.

- Decoctions should be chosen when the migraine is intense, severe, and/or persistent.

- Powders should be chosen when the migraine is mild to moderate, or in the period between attacks.
- Patent herbs can be chosen when migraine is following a typical pattern differentiation.

Acupuncture and massage

If the migraine was triggered by disease of the cervical spine, whiplash, stress, depression, anxiety, etc., the combining of acupuncture and massage will provide the patient with a greater degree of comfort.

Clinical audit of 25 cases

Between February 2000 and February 2003, I treated 25 cases of migraine, consisting of five males and 20 females aged from 25 to 56 years. These patients had suffered migraine from six months to 30 years. In 11 patients (44%) the migraine was controlled with no recurrence after a full course of treatment. In 5 patients (20%) there was definite improvement with only occasional migraines occurring. In 2 patients (8%) there was slight improvement with less frequent and severe attacks, and in 7 patients (28%) there was no improvement, with the patients stopping treatment after up to three visits.

Integrating Chinese and conventional medicine

In the treatment of migraine, three kinds of drugs are routinely used:

Prophylactics

These are prescribed for patients who have more than one migraine a week and need long-term treatment. Typical prophylactics include:

- Antidepressants
- Beta-blockers
- Calcium channel blockers
- Anti-convulsants

Abortives

These are used when a patient is experiencing an acute, severe, intense or persistent migraine. Generally, they can only be taken once within a 24-hour period. One of these, Sumatriptan, is the main substance found in Imigran commonly used in the UK, and Imitrex used in the USA.

Analgesics

Generally a multi drug consisting of an analgesic, an anti-emetic and other ingredients.

If drugs from any of these three categories are used for prolonged periods of time, there are likely to be side-effects, especially with abortives.

Although abortives are known for their effectiveness, some patients complain that if they are taken for a prolonged period, the migraine attacks become more frequent. This is one of the reasons why patients seek some form of complementary or alternative medicine.

I am of the opinion that traditional Chinese therapies are better than conventional prophylactic medication over an extended period, are similar or better than analgesics during a migraine attack, but are not as effective as abortives in extremely acute attacks.

The best model is to use traditional Chinese therapies as a general rule, with abortives being taken when required, during the initial stages of treatment and gradually reduce their use until they are no longer required.

Analysis of Chinese therapies integrated with other complementary and alternative therapies

Chiropractic/osteopathy

Both these therapies use manipulation, mostly of the musculoskeletal system in the spinal region, to support uninterrupted blood flow at the neck and head. Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine blend successfully with these therapies to enhance and accelerate a positive outcome.

Shiatsu/reflexology

Both these therapies massage the channels. Shiatsu is general body massage, while reflexology concentrates mainly on the feet. Both can help patients relax, regulate qi and blood circulation throughout the whole body and stimulate particular points. Both are safe procedures and can offer some benefits for patients suffering from migraine, but their effects are limited. They can be helpful for patients who are frightened of needles and for teenagers and children, and in these cases can be combined with Chinese herbal medicine.

Western Herbs/homoeopathy

If Chinese herbs are prescribed to patients, they should not normally be taking western herbs prescribed by another practitioner, as complications may arise.

In the case of homeopathy, both the homoeopathic and Chinese medicine practitioner need to observe the results of their treatment particularly carefully in order to make necessary adjustments. For this reason, it is preferable not to combine the two treatments.

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