Adapting treatments to patients, the secret and limits of TCM today

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ABSTRACT

Conventional medicine, who experimented and developed its pharmacy and surgery on the occasion of wars or epidemics throughout history, tends to consider that the best medicine is necessarily the most powerful one. Western medicine usually reproaches to natural or traditional medicines their lack of efficiency. For instance, Chinese medicine has no medicinal remedy strong enough to make someone immediately fall asleep, independently of the reason of his insomnia. On the other hand, giving sleeping pills for years to someone who suffers from chronic insomnia is not treating the illness, but hiding it behind a symptomatic remedy, itself source of side effects on the long term.

The main difference between modern medicine and traditional medicine is that the latter does not have the power to force the body to do something. It rather helps it to correct its unbalance, which is a very different purpose. But for that, a deep understanding and a good diagnosis of the patient and his problem are essential. Once the diagnosis is clear, the treatment becomes obvious. It is the adequacy of acupuncture points, drugs or advices you give to the patient, and not their intrinsic power, that makes their efficiency. If the body does not need an acupuncture point, it will not react to it. It is fortunate, otherwise, as I often say to my students, all mosquitos would be acupuncturists!

This is one of the reasons why natural and traditional medicines are safer than western medicine. But in order to be really effective, and to treat the root of the problems, they have no other choice than to adapt treatments to patients, and not patients to treatments. This is how Chinese medicine has crossed the centuries, treating each patient as if he was the emperor.

But since the last cultural revolution, this respectable medicine had to face several changes and difficulties, in China as in Western countries:

1. "Integrative Chinese medicine" of today clearly follows the epistemological standards of western medicine, trying to prove the effects of acupuncture through experiences on mice, or testing the same traditional herbal formulas on thousands of patients in order to check their effectiveness (and guess what, the result is of course not very convincing);

2. Official and alternative medicines share today the same major concern, which is to relieve symptoms through therapeutic recipes, rather than to diagnose and treat everyone individually. This is in accordance with our modern way of approaching medicine, based on industrial logic.

3. Doctors, pharmacists and patient of today seem to share a common disease, called laziness. All are fond of quick solutions and immediate results. Prescribing, selling or taking the same manufactured or standardized treatment instead of a personalized one, follow the same logic as manufacturing, selling and eating big macs instead of good traditional dishes.

Sometimes, instead of researching new solutions, we would be well advised to rediscover old ones, carried by millenary traditions. This is why, on my opinion, the most important task of TCM, contemporary to Hippocrates's medicine, is to remind to people the deep link between health and simplicity, although being simple is a difficult task in the world of today.