

Chinese puzzle

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Western **medicine** can't always explain how it works, but treatments from the East have gained acceptance. Paula Goodyer reports.

Faced with acute pain, most people head for the nearest hospital. For many chronic conditions, however, more than 5 per cent of Australians now use traditional **Chinese medicine**, according to **Professor Charlie Xue**, head of the division of **Chinese Medicine** at RMIT University.

Western **medicine** is some way from wholeheartedly embracing traditional **Chinese medicine** (TCM), but there have been moves to incorporate aspects of it. "When I came to Australia from China 12 years ago, the medical profession didn't want to know about **Chinese medicine**, but now it's more open-minded," Xue says.

In Xue's case, this open-mindedness has seen his treatments incorporated into an emergency **medicine** setting. "My team now provides **acupuncture** to treat patients in pain at the emergency department at Melbourne's Northern Hospital - if we'd suggested this 10 years ago, people would have laughed at us."

The World Health Organisation has acknowledged the role such **medicine** plays in health treatments, and in 2002 launched a strategy to gather more evidence on its safety and efficacy. That same year, Australia's first **Chinese Medicine** Clinical Research Centre opened in Liverpool Hospital to run clinical trials of herbal **medicine** and **acupuncture** for gynaecological problems.

The trials included research into the effect of **Chinese herbs** on endometriosis. Sydney policewoman Gina*, 32, took part in the trials and, after a decade of debilitating period pain, no longer juggles her shifts to ensure her time off coincides with her periods. "The first period I had after taking the **herbs** was much less painful, and by the second month, there was no pain at all," she says. "It's been life-altering."

Meanwhile, with two unsuccessful attempts at in vitro fertilisation, only one functioning fallopian tube and her 41st birthday looming, Joanne Day wasn't optimistic about conceiving - especially when a doctor diagnosed problems with her new partner's sperm. "The specialist said the only way we'd conceive was with IVF, but I didn't want to go through that again," says Day, who instead consulted **Jann Mehmet**, a TCM practitioner. After a few months of regular **acupuncture** and a healthier diet, she conceived at 41 and had a baby at 42.

"The word is out that **acupuncture** can treat muscular-skeletal problems, irregular periods, coughs and colds, infertility and many other conditions," says North Shore practitioner **Melissa Scott**. At first people came as a last resort. Now we find that people who have success with **Chinese medicine** often come with subsequent problems, rather than go to a GP first. What draws many people is that they're wary of the side effects of some Western medication.

"Drugs are often Band-Aids that treat symptoms but not the underlying cause - with eczema, for instance, you can be given cortisone to reduce inflammation but it doesn't address the cause. TCM on the other hand can help by strengthening the immune system and digestive function."

Few Western-trained doctors refer patients to a TCM practitioner, though one doctor now refers children with eczema to Scott for pediatric massage - an alternative to **acupuncture** for children who are afraid of needles.

The barriers to more doctors referring patients for TCM include lack of registration - only Victoria has a registration system for its practitioners - and lack of evidence for its benefits. Still, Xue says, it is the subject of increasing study and there's some evidence that **acupuncture** helps treat headaches, period pain, back pain and chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting. Studies suggest it may improve IVF's success, though it is unclear why.

"It may increase blood flow to the uterus," says **Dr Caroline Smith**, who has conducted a study of **acupuncture** and IVF through the University of Adelaide. "It needs more research, but we know **acupuncture** does no harm and may increase women's chances of success."

As for **Chinese** herbal **medicine**, its acceptance lags behind **acupuncture**, which now attracts a Medicare rebate provided it is done by a medical doctor trained in **acupuncture**. But Australian research has found that **Chinese herbs** can slow liver damage caused by hepatitis C, and animal studies at Sydney's Garvan Institute of Medical Research suggest a **Chinese** herb, berberine, shows promise for diabetes by helping to reduce blood sugar levels.

At the University of Technology in Sydney, trials of a **Chinese** herbal formula in rats has found it reduces the risky symptoms of metabolic syndrome - pot belly, high blood pressure, high blood fats and insulin resistance.

Evidence to support TCM is building, yet its mystique persists because it's hard to find Western medical explanations for how it works. Unlike Western **medicine**, which often reduces the cause of illness to a specific organ or system in the body, TCM attributes disease to an imbalance affecting many different parts of the body. It holds that good health depends on a strong flow of an energy source called "chi" coursing through meridians or pathways in the body - we get sick when pathways become blocked, preventing the flow of chi.

This may have its own logic - but X-rays can't detect a blocked meridian and there's no test to measure chi.

But Western **medicine** could explain why some research suggests **acupuncture** may improve polycystic ovarian syndrome, the hormonal disorder affecting 5 to 10 per cent of Australian women.

With this disorder, "the levels of male hormones are increased, disrupting menstruation and fertility", says Dr Danforn Lim of the faculty of **medicine** at the University of NSW, who is studying the use of **acupuncture** to treat the syndrome. "Studies have found **acupuncture** helps menstruation and fertility return to normal." This may be due to **acupuncture's** effect on a part of the brain called the hypothalamus. Research suggests **acupuncture** raises levels of beta-endorphins, the body's natural pain-killers produced by the hypothalamus, which controls the hormone-regulating pituitary gland, Lim explains.

As for the effects of herbal **medicine** on period pain, about 55 trials from Japan, Taiwan and China say it's effective, says researcher Dr Xiaoshu Zhu, of the Centre for Complementary **Medicine** Research at the University of Western Sydney.

According to **Chinese medicine**, **herbs** work by clearing blocked meridians and strengthening the reproductive system, she says, but a Western explanation might be that they have an effect on hormones, relax uterine muscles or reduce prostaglandins, chemicals thought to cause period pain.

There are parallels in **Chinese** and Western **medicine**, Zhu says, but "you can't always make sense of **Chinese medicine** in Western **medicine** terms".

As with others trained in both practices, she believes learning both gives practitioners more skills to draw on. Or as Xue says, "Neither is perfect - but if we can get the best of both worlds, we get the best for patients."

*Name has been changed

Can **acupuncture** provide relief from hepatitis C symptoms? Working in a drug rehabilitation unit, Sydney acupuncturist Christine Berle worked with people who had hepatitis C - the chronic viral disease infecting the livers of 242,000 people in Australia, and causing 16,000 new infections annually. When her patients went for routine tests after a few weeks of **acupuncture**, their liver function had dramatically improved. Now Berle, a postgraduate student at UTS, is conducting a trial to see whether 12 weeks of **acupuncture** has any effect on liver function in people with hepatitis C. The drug treatment available to clear the virus does not work for everyone.