

Unlock the joys of traditional medicine

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All sorts of people are being helped by Chinese medicine, writes Louise Gee

Just before the slender needles pierce various points on his body, Ross Hames falls asleep. While some people may tense at the thought of needles, Hames relaxes and looks forward to the regular acupuncture treatments he's been having ever since he suffered a heart attack while bushwalking 13 years ago.

When no one could explain the 24-yr-old draftsman's attack which led to double bypass surgery, he turned to Chinese medicine.

"I still see a regular GP for medication but under Chinese Medicine I feel more aligned," Hames says. "I end up with less nagging health problems; my digestive system is better; I sleep better and have less stress."

When Hames and increasingly more non-Asians are discovering qi (energy) – the basic life force that suffuses every cell and tissue of the body – that is central to Chinese medicine.

The Australia Association for Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture says people are healthy when they have an abundant supply of qi. If the flow of qi becomes blocked or there is an inadequate supply of qi, then the body fails to maintain balance and disease or illness follows.

Brisbane traditional Chinese medicine practitioner Paul St John explains: "Qi is not just energy flowing through the body it's the activity and organisation of the body in real – not some mysterious subtle energy."

According to a new book on the subject, acupuncture nudges qi (pronounced 'chee') back to equilibrium by inserting needles at specific acupoints along the body's meridians or channels and pulsing the body with a low electric current to free up blocked energy. *Qi! Chinese Secrets of Health, Beauty & Vitality* by Kate O'Brien with Troy Sing, president of the Hong Kong Medical Acupuncture Association, unlocks thousands of years of traditional Chinese medicine for the layperson with home remedies for boosting energy and immunity, herbal formulations, and advice on how to eat with the seasons and food natures. It explores other aspects of Chinese medicine- herbal tonics, massage. Exercise, lifestyle advice and cupping – all of which may improve qi.

Cupping is an ancient form of Chinese massage that uses bamboo or glass light bulb-shaped jars that are fixed on points in the body. Using a vacuum pump, the suction pulls the skin upwards within the jar, bringing a flow of blood and qi to the area. It can be applied to treat influenza to arthritic pain.

Cupping and acupuncture were treatments Darrel Jardine never thought he'd embrace, but headaches, dizziness and knotted shoulders and neck muscles had made working intolerable. "I was a bit like some people are when I tell I see a traditional Chinese practitioner," Jardine recalls. "They think, it's all hocus pocus'," Nine years on, Jardine, a partner in Brisbane law firm Hopgood Ganim, plans to keep his fortnightly appointments for general well-being and occasional muscle tightness for the rest of his life. Although he "hates the needles", Jardine says that once they're inserted he doesn't feel pain. Similarly, back scraping with a buffalo horn and cupping aren't painful even though the cups leave telltale circular marks. "I walk away from it feeling recharged," Jardine enthuses. "I feel focused and it gives me the concentration I need in court and to work 60 hours a week."

Improving qi may also require herbs and tonics, which the Chinese have been using for thousands of years. Traditional Chinese medicine uses more than 450 plant, animal and mineral substances in herbal medicine. "Chinese herbs are rated according to their energies, flavours and nature once inside the body," say O'Brien and Sing. Chinese herbs may be prescribed as formulae containing up to 20 herbs to treat the main and associated symptoms along with "harmoniser" herbs that reduce any harsh or toxic effect.

Herbal prescriptions have become part of Cathy Craig-Neal's nightly routine for her general health. The insurance industry businesswoman was sceptical about traditional Chinese medicine but "would do anything to fall pregnant". Although she remained on an in-vitro fertilisation program, she credits acupuncture and herbal prescriptions for the arrival of Georgia 10 months ago.

Like herbs, foods can affect women's gynaecological and obstetric conditions. The way food is eaten and at different times of the year may also affect health qi, O'Brien and Sing argue: "The nature of inherent temperature of foods determines their effects once inside the body and can be defined as hot, warm, cool,

cold and neutral. For example, eating foods with a hot nature or energy like chilli peppers includes a feeling of warmth.

Brisbane traditional Chinese medicine practitioner James Ng warns that women who have too many cool foods (e.g. fish, cucumber, melons, ice cream) may have painful periods because cool foods congeal the blood. However, he does not believe the holistic approach of traditional medicine requires a rigid lifestyle.

“You don’t have to change your life and Western medicine complements Chinese medicine,” he says.

Ng, whose practice has grown threefold in the last 20 years, grew up in a Chinese family in Malaysia. Tonics and herbal-infused brews, such as dang gui chicken soup for his sister’s period pain, were part of family life.

While diners can request dang gui or dong quai – the queen of women’s herbs – for menstrual cramps and menopause in their menu selection from some Chinese restaurants it may have unwanted side effects: spontaneous abortion and unwanted interactions with the Western anticoagulant drug Warfarin.

Practitioners warn that although some herbs are available over the counter for home remedies, their strength and the way they are used differ to traditional Chinese medicine professional’s prescription. Paul St John, who teaches at the Australia Centre for Complementary Medicine, says a lay person may purchase herbs but can’t determine what’s the best treatment and dosage.

“Generally speaking herbs are safe to take with drug medication but one must always be vigilant and observant,” St John says.

People interested in tradition medicine can contact the [Australia Association for Chinese Medicine and Acupuncture \(www.acupuncture.org.au\)](http://www.acupuncture.org.au) for a list of member practitioners. The profession remains unregulated in Queensland.