

Chinese Medicine as an Adjunct Treatment for Breast Cancer: An Interview with Barbara Kirschbaum

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Abstract

This article is the transcription of an interview with Barbara Kirschbaum, a practitioner of Chinese medicine with extensive experience in the adjunctive treatment of cancer.



To start with, why don't you tell us a bit about your Chinese medicine education. I know you began in the UK at The International College of Oriental Medicine in the UK. How was that and what happened next?

Studying in East Grinstead was a fantastic experience. For me it was mind-opening as I had no idea about Chinese medicine or philosophy when I started my studies there in 1978. In Germany I had qualified as a radio and television engineer and I only came by chance to study Chinese medicine. At the time I felt very lucky to teach and work in the clinic there. I guess I did every course available in the following years and was greatly inspired by Dr. John Shen, Ted Kaptchuk, Dan Bensky and Giovanni Maciocia who were teaching syndrome differentiation and Chinese herbal medicine. In 1992 I left the UK with a heavy heart and started to practise and teach in Germany. In 1997 I left for China, stayed for one year and studied in Tianjin, Chengdu and Kunming, doing internships in the gynaecology and gastro-intestinal departments.

The idea of writing the tongue books was really inspired by my students. In Germany most of the education in the 1990s took place on weekends only. There was little time or opportunity for students to be supervised in a clinical situation. Plus they seemed to have great difficulty distinguishing different pulse qualities. So I felt it could be much easier to reach a more exact diagnosis of a possible disease pattern by looking at the tongue ... much more simple to distinguish a red from a pale tongue than a wiry pulse from a tight one. I love the tongue, because I think one can see the energetic course of a person's life, from the past through to the present. It was fascinating to put the book together, especially the German version. I spent a whole week with the printers trying to get the colours right, looking at every sheet.

More recently, you have been specialising in using acupuncture in the treatment of women with breast cancer. How did this come about?

For many years I had been treating people with cancerous diseases. I found especially that women who had contracted breast cancer were drawn to complementary therapies and wanted to contribute to their healing. Clinical practice showed me that acupuncture and herbs could alleviate some of the side effects caused by chemotherapy, radiation and anti-hormonal treatment. Because of this I wanted to promote Chinese medicine on a larger scale, other than just working in my own clinic. Also I figured the treatment should be free of charge in order to enable women to have acupuncture treatment regardless of their income. Chemotherapy takes about six months to be completed, and weekly acupuncture treatment often seemed necessary. It's not surprising that a lot of these women could not afford private health care. Then two things happened simultaneously.

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You wrote two excellent books on tongue diagnosis published by Eastland Press. What was it about tongue diagnosis that fascinated you and what was it like putting together these two books – especially ones that relied so much on photo and colour reproduction.

Doctors at one of the biggest centres for the treatment of breast cancer in Germany (Mammazentrum, Jerusalem-Krankenhaus, Hamburg) were interested in my work and asked me to present my ideas. And I found a sponsor who paid for all treatments (acupuncture and herbs) and for a research project! Now we have been going for five years and the centre has grown. Besides Chinese medicine, patients are offered meditation courses, exercise classes, painting classes and continuous education on diet. One of the doctors and I arrange special cooking classes and also go shopping with some of the women in specialised health-food stores. I have now I have treated over two thousand women in the breast cancer centre and have given about ten thousand acupuncture treatments.

What can acupuncture offer women with breast cancer?

Acupuncture works well for many side-effects. However the effect does not last that long, which means one should really give treatment on a weekly basis. Of course this is due to the strong pathological and toxic nature of a chemotherapy infusion. The drugs epirubicin and cyclophosphamid are given directly into the blood. They are highly toxic, contribute to the development of hot blood and create a serious disharmony of the Stomach qi. This results in nausea and epigastric fullness followed days later by hair loss and occasionally by skin rashes. In addition to the chemotherapeutic drugs, cortisone is given by infusion and also orally for three to four days. Many women experience insomnia, severe inner restlessness, anxiety and hunger pangs from their medication. Immediate treatment, given after the chemotherapy, alleviates the symptoms within a few hours. My favourite acupuncture treatment consists of Shenmen HE-7, Daling P-7 and Taiyuan LU-9 with Dazhong KID-4. If the inner agitation is marked, I will add Shenting DU-24. If nausea, difficulty in swallowing and change in taste allow the ingestion of herbs, my basic prescription is *Bai He Di Huang Tang* (Lily Bulb and Rehmannia Decoction).

Another good example of the efficacy of acupuncture is the treatment of polyneuropathy. Numbness, tingling or even pain of the extremities occur in about sixty per cent of women who are prescribed weekly infusions of a drug called Paclitaxel. The nerve damage occurs mostly around the sixth week of treatment. It is important to apply acupuncture as soon as those symptoms appear - ideally at least twice a week. The following extra points work really well: Sifeng M-UE-9 and Baxie M-UE-22 for the upper extremities and Bafeng M-LE-8 for the lower. Whenever possible I also prescribe Chinese herbs. However this poses some problems - the oncologists worry about drug-herb-interaction, and the patients often can't drink or digest them.

What challenges do you face in this work?

One of the biggest challenges is to find ways to get patients to make changes in terms of dietary habits, sport activities and maybe even in their thoughts. I also find it very difficult when a woman has developed metastases of the brain, liver, bones and so on. Acupuncture can do little in this instance, but I have found that treatment with Chinese herbs can very beneficial. It seems to promote a better quality of life and helps her tolerate the second line of treatment.

When one starts as a practitioner, it is important to gain experience by treating illnesses or problems that can be resolved with Chinese medicine. That makes you excited, enthusiastic and happy.

How much do you address the emotional impact of a breast cancer diagnosis and do you find that a patient's mental/emotional attitude plays a significant role in their disease?

This is a really good question. The patient's mental attitude plays an important role. Once the shock from the diagnosis has passed, many women take quite a positive view and use the time to rethink some of their issues in life. It seems to me that those who are socially active, engage in physical activity and change their diet cope best mentally with long-term treatment. The very fearful and angry patient, who initially resists the idea of chemotherapy and then agrees to it, often does not fare so well. For these women especially, I find acupuncture very helpful, as it calms the shen and may promote some inner clarity.

You are in the process of conducting research into the role of acupuncture in breast cancer. I know you have encountered some problems (you discussed them at the Rothenberg Congress science day). Can you tell us about these and what you have learned from entering the research minefield?

The recruitment of the patients turned out to be quite difficult, despite working in the hospital and with the acceptance of the doctors there. I think one major factor was the design of the study. I refused to do sham acupuncture. The idea of a waiting list seemed a good way around it, and the ethical committee eventually agreed to it. Of the 150 women, 75 were randomised by computer for the waiting list (receiving no acupuncture during chemotherapy), and 75 received acupuncture. The anger and disappointment of the women on the waiting list was overwhelming when they found out they would have to

wait for treatment. I would definitely advise against this. Also, as the recruitment took so long, the chemotherapies changed three times during that time which required a new proposal each time from the ethical committee.

As a practitioner with long experience what advice can you offer novice practitioners and students?

Yes, don't specialise in the treatment of people with cancerous diseases. When one starts as a practitioner, it is important to gain experience by treating illnesses or problems that can be resolved with Chinese medicine. That makes you excited, enthusiastic and happy. To obtain good results with cancer is very difficult and often short-lived, not to mention all the problems involved in dealing with the oncologists and doctors. Acupuncture alone is often not strong enough to really address the situation. With regard to herbal treatment, problems can arise with herb-drug interactions as well as lack of compliance from the patient, despite the enormous benefits this treatment can offer.

Many patients told me that prior to developing the disease they had felt physically exhausted and mentally stressed.

Has your work with breast cancer made you more aware of your own health?

My work with women who suffer with breast cancer and the subsequent treatment they have to undergo has

had a profound influence on my perception of myself in a physical, mental and spiritual way. I had never had a medical check-up until the time I started work at the hospital. So now I go twice a year for an ultrasound examination of my breasts. It gives me a sense of security. Many patients told me that prior to developing the disease they had felt physically exhausted and mentally stressed. So I have reduced my work-load from sixty to fifty hours a week, to avoid exhaustion. I look at situations that involve stress for me much more closely and seek to avoid those. But I guess the most important thing for me is, that I often experience a sense of gratefulness for my life, and for the love that is around me.

What do you do to keep healthy?

I have changed my diet quite dramatically, avoiding dairy and meat. Windsurfing throughout the year and fitness training keep me mentally and physically fresh. And importantly, I adhere to regular sleeping hours.

Barbara Kirschbaum is a TCM practitioner with many years of experience in teaching and practising Chinese medicine. Her specialties include digestive diseases, gynaecological complaints and cancer support.

Peter Deadman has worked in the field of 'alternative' healthcare for over forty years. He recently published 'Live Well, Live Long' about the Chinese yangsheng (nourishment of life) tradition.
