

The Chinese Medicine Treatment of Anorexia Nervosa

Abstract

This article presents the treatment of anorexia nervosa with Chinese medicine (Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture). It is excerpted from a forthcoming clinical manual on the treatment of infertility with Chinese medicine.

Anorexia nervosa is called *xue ku bi jing* (血枯闭经, blood exhaustion with blocked periods) according to the disease categorisation (*bing*) of traditional Chinese gynaecology. Although the traditional disease identification identifies anorexia nervosa as a type of exhaustion of the body's resources, it is now recognised that it is fundamentally a disease of body and heart-mind (身-心, *shen-xin*). Because the mind is unstable, (神不守舍, *shen bu shou she* - *shen* is not stable in its proper chamber), the young woman starves herself. It is important to treat anorexia nervosa as early as possible to prevent long-term complications. Some patients will come to the Chinese medicine fertility clinic in the aftermath of anorexia treatment for support in restoring their menstrual cycles, or in preparation for an IVF or a donor cycle. Others may attend the clinic and disclose a history of an eating disorder. In all cases, the patterns below will guide the practitioner in appropriate treatment.

Aetiology and pathogenesis

Anorexia nervosa typically involves damage to multiple organs - the Heart, Liver, Spleen, Kidney and Stomach - caused primarily by emotional factors. However, the primary and most severe problem is injury to the Spleen and Stomach. The pathogenesis is as follows.

- Anxiety, overthinking and mental strain damage Spleen qi, causing deficiency of qi and blood. Since deficient qi and blood are unable to support the Heart, the *shen* is unable to settle. This unsettled *shen* is a precursor to an eating disorder.
- Frustration, anger and constrained emotions cause Liver qi stagnation, which then invades and damages the Spleen, the foundation of the post-heaven constitution. If Liver qi stagnation

generates fire, this can further injure the Spleen. Mental distress often arises from a history of being overweight. There is frequently self-loathing and hurt from having been teased and excluded by peers. The resulting stress, fear and depression cause Liver qi stagnation which damages the Spleen's capacity to transform food and fluids.

- Poor food choices or eating habits damage the Spleen's capacity to transform food and drink. Damp and phlegm arise and obstruct the Heart and lead to mental confusion. Phlegm then combines with qi stagnation which together underlie the eating disorder. Spleen deficiency can also lead to disorders of the Stomach and a tendency to vomit, which can be a precursor to bulimia.
- In all cases, refusal to eat causes severe weight loss and further injury to Spleen qi. The resultant exhaustion of blood and qi damages reserves of *jing-essence*. *Tian gui* is then unable to transform in a normal way to provide for hormonal activity and the menstrual cycle. Deficiency of *jing-essence* and blood means that the menses stop.

Patterns

Deficiency

Deficiency of Spleen qi and Heart blood

Mixed

Stagnation of Liver qi and deficiency of Spleen qi

Excess

Obstruction by phlegm-dampness and stagnation of Liver qi

Deficiency of Spleen qi and Heart blood

The patient presents with a pale and sallow

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complexion, anxiety, insomnia, agitation, palpitations, exhaustion, loose stools and a history of worrying or overthinking. She reports poor digestion with abdominal distention after food, nausea and/or vomiting, and may be unable to savour or even taste food because of a sticky/greasy sensation in the mouth. At the onset of the condition, the periods will have become gradually lighter and the cycle longer before stopping altogether.

Tongue: pale, scalloped, tender and swollen, with a thin white or greasy coating.

Pulse: deep (chen), thready (xi) and weak (ruo).

Treatment principles: Tonify the Spleen and Heart, calm the shen, harmonise the Stomach and nourish blood to regulate the periods.

Prescription: Modified *Gui Pi Tang* (Restore the Spleen Decoction, 归脾汤, from *Categorised Essentials for Normalising the Structure*, 1529)

Ren Shen (Ginseng Radix) 6-10g [or Dang Shen (Codonopsis Radix) 15g]
Huang Qi (Astragali Radix) 10-15g
Bai Zhu (Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma) 10g
Fu Shen (Poriae Sclerotium paradicis) 15g
Zhi Gan Cao (Glycyrrhizae Radix) 6g
Dang Gui (Angelicae sinensis Radix) 10g
Long Yan Rou (Longan Arillus) 15g
Mu Xiang (Aucklandiae Radix) 3-6g
Yuan Zhi (Polygalae Radix) 6g
Suan Zao Ren (Ziziphi spinosae Semen) 15g
Dan Shen (Salviae miltiorrhizae Radix) 10-15g
Shi Chang Pu (Acori tatarinowii Rhizoma) 6-10g

Explanation: In the amenorrhoea chapter of his book *Ji Yin Gang Mu* (*Outline of Women's Diseases*), Zhu Dan Xi states, 'Amenorrhoea may be caused by Spleen-Stomach disharmony and an insufficient diet leading to non-creation of blood; treatment should produce more blood according to pattern; when blood is full, the period will come by itself.' The above formula addresses a situation where deficiency of qi and blood has impacted the shen. It tonifies Spleen qi and Heart blood to generate qi and blood and calm the shen. Mildly warm Ren Shen tonifies Spleen qi. In combination with sweet-warm Huang Qi, Bai Zhu and neutral Zhi Gan Cao it strongly tonifies the source of qi and blood. Neutral Fu Shen supports Spleen qi and calms the spirit. Neutral Suan Zao Ren and warm Long Yan Rou nourish Heart blood and calm the spirit. Warm Dang Gui and cool Dan Shen nourish and move blood. Pungent-mildly warm Yuan Zhi and pungent-warm Shi Chang Pu harmonise the Stomach to stimulate the appetite and, by opening the orifices, help clear and open the mind to

recovery. Pungent-warm Mu Xiang regulates qi and acts as an assistant to help the Spleen digest the tonic formula.

Modifications

- In patients with very poor appetite, add pungent-aromatic-warm Sha Ren (Amomi Fructus) 5g (for a few minutes only at the end of the decoction), sweet-neutral Ji Nei Jin (Gigeriae galli Endothelium corneum) 10g, sweet-warm Mai Ya (Hordei Fructus germinatus) 10-15g or sweet-neutral Gu Ya (Setariae Oryzae Fructus germinatus) 10-15g.
- For abdominal distension and nausea, add (all bitter-warm) Hou Po (Magnoliae officinalis Cortex) 6g, Huo Xiang (Pogostemonis/Agastaches Herba) 6g or Fo Shou (Citri sarcodactylis Fructus) 6g.
- For palpitations, add sweet-neutral Ye Jiao Teng (Polygoni Multiflori Caulis) 10-15g and sour Wu Wei Zi (Schisandrae Fructus) 6-7g.
- For insomnia add neutral Ye Jiao Teng (Polygoni Multiflori Caulis) 10-15g and cold Ci Shi (Magnetitum) 15-20g. Neutral Bai Zi Ren (Platycladi Semen) 15g is particularly good if there is also constipation.
- For loose stools or diarrhoea, add neutral Lian Zi (Semen Nelumbinis Nuciferae) 10g or mildly warm Bai Bian Dou (Lablab Semen album) 10-15g.
- For low spirits, sadness and depression add neutral He Huan Pi (Albiziae Cortex) 10-15g, cold Yu Jin (Curcumae Radix) 6-10g and/or sweet-warm Mei Gui Hua (Rosae rugosae Flos) 6g.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture treatment is focused on tonifying the Spleen to nourish blood and strengthen the digestion, as well as calming the shen to address the emotional aspect of the disorder. Care is needed when needling a very thin person, especially on the chest, lower abdomen or upper back points. It is also very important not to promote the movement of blood too quickly since doing this prematurely will exhaust the patient's resources. If and when there is evidence of recovery (from verbal feedback and pulse diagnosis) and it seems there are sufficient resources, the practitioner can begin to move blood gently to promote a bleed. Reinforcing needle technique and moxibustion are recommended.

- To tonify Spleen qi: Taibai SP-3, Gongsun SP-4, Sanyinjiao SP-6, Zusanli ST-36, Zhongwan REN-12, Pishu BL-20, Guanyuan REN-4, Qihai REN-6.
- To nourish blood: direct moxa on Geshu BL-17 and Danshu BL-19 (the 'Four Flowers'), Ganshu BL-18, Pishu BL-20, Xuehai SP-10.

- For anxiety and shen disturbance: Yintang (M-HN-3), Baihui DU-20, Sishencong M-HN-1, Neiguan PC-6, Shenmen HT-7, Zhizheng SI-7, Jueque REN-14, Jiuwei REN-15, Lingxu KID-24, Shencang KID-25, Jueyinshu BL-14, Xinshu BL-15, Shentang BL-44, Yishe BL-49; if there is insomnia consider adding Anmian (M-HN-54).
- When applicable, to move blood and regulate the menses: Siman KID-14, Zhongji REN-3, Guilai ST-29, Qichong ST-30, Chongmen SP-12 and Shangliao BL-31 to Xialiao BL-34.

Stagnation of Liver qi and deficiency of Spleen qi

This patient is physically frail and feels weak. There will be clear evidence of a history of depression, with frustration, hostility and outbursts of anger. She may disclose binge-eating and/or bulimia. She often suffers insomnia and restlessness at night-time, as well as tightness of the chest and hypochondrium, and painful distention of the abdomen with gas, cramping and loose stools. Her periods would have been dark in colour, painful and irregular before stopping suddenly. She may have a sallow complexion.

Tongue: Normal shape and colour, possibly slightly swollen with redder edges and a white coating (or dry yellow if Liver qi stagnation has transformed into fire).

Pulse: thready, thin and wiry.

Treatment principles: Tonify the Spleen and soothe the Liver to regulate Liver qi, harmonise the Stomach and regulate the periods

Prescription: Modified *Xiang Sha Liu Jun Zi Tang* (香砂六君子汤, Six-Gentleman Decoction, from *Discussion of Famous Physicians' Formulas Past and Present*, 1675) and *Xiao Yao San* (逍遥散, Rambling Powder, from *Formula of the Pharmacy Service for Benefiting the People in the Taiping Era*, 1107)

Sha Ren (Amomi Fructus) 3-5g
 Mu Xiang (Aucklandiae Radix) 6g
 Dang Shen (Codonopsis Radix) 10-15g
 Bai Zhu (Atractylodis macrocephalae Rhizoma) 10g
 Fu Ling (Poria) 12g
 Chen Pi (Citri reticulatae Pericarpium) 6-10g
 Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) 10g
 Dang Gui (Angelicae sinensis Radix) 10g
 Chai Hu (Bupleuri Radix) 6g
 Lu E Mei (Flos Pruni Mume) 6g
 Mei Gui Hua (Rosae rugosae Flos) 6g

Explanation: This formula strengthens the Spleen, regulates Liver qi and harmonises the Liver and Spleen to treat the qi stagnation that has damaged the Spleen and thus the

production of blood. Aromatic-warm Sha Ren and Mu Xiang revive the Spleen and stimulate the appetite in combination with the general tonifying action of the formula. Sweet-warm Dang Gui and sour-astringent Bai Shao combine to nourish Liver blood. Pungent-cool Chai Hu disperses stagnant Liver qi. Sour-neutral Lu E Mei regulates the Liver and harmonises the Liver and the Spleen, while sweet-warm Mei Gui Hua regulates Liver qi, harmonises the Liver and Spleen and gently moves blood. Because they are flowers, the last two herbs also have a lifting action which helps to raise depressed spirits.

Modifications

- To further stimulate appetite and/or treat gastric distention, add raw Mai Ya (Hordei Fructus germinatus) 15g and Ji Nei Jin (Gigeriae galli Endothelium corneum) 10g. Add Shan Zha (Crataegi Fructus) 10-15g if there is combined poor appetite and distention due to food and blood stagnation.
- For poor sleep, add sweet-neutral He Huan Pi (Albiziae Cortex) 10-15g, which tranquillises the mind by regulating Liver qi, thus promoting sleep. Where there is also evidence of blood deficiency-type insomnia add sweet-neutral Ye Jiao Teng (Polygoni Multiflori Caulis) 10-15g, sweet-sour-neutral Suan Zao Ren (Ziziphi spinosae Semen) 15g or sweet-warm Long Yan Rou (Longan Arillus) 15g.
- If there is a white greasy tongue coating, add pungent-warm Shi Chang Pu (Acori tatarinowii Rhizoma) 6-10g to harmonise the Stomach, improve the appetite and open the orifices.
- For depression linked to the eating disorder, add neutral He Huan Pi (Albiziae Cortex) 15g or He Huan Hua (Albiziae Flos) 6-10g, or cold Yu Jin 10g if there is evidence of qi stagnation transforming to heat.
- If Liver qi stagnation generates heat and Spleen qi deficiency causes damp so that the tongue coating is yellow and greasy, omit warm Bai Zhu and Dang Shen and substitute cold Huang Lian (Coptidis Rhizoma) 3-6g and cool Yi Yi Ren (Coicis Semen) 20-30g.
- For chest, stomach or abdominal distention add (according to appropriate temperature): pungent-warm Fo Shou (Citri sarcodactylis Fructus) 6g, pungent-cool Zhi Qiao (Aurantii Fructus) 10g, pungent-bitter-cold Yu Jin (Curcumae Radix) 6-10g, or bitter-cold Chuan Lian Zi (Toosendan Fructus) 6-9g. Yu Jin also acts on the mind since it opens the orifices. For distention against a background of constipation add bitter-cool Zhi Shi (Aurantii Fructus immaturus) 10g, or bitter-cold Gua Lou (Trichosanthis Fructus) 30g.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture treatment is focused on regulating Liver qi and harmonising the Liver and the Spleen. This will assist post-natal qi to produce blood and re-establish the menses. It is important not to promote the movement of blood too quickly since doing this prematurely will exhaust the patient's resources. If and when there is evidence of recovery (from verbal feedback and pulse diagnosis) and it seems there are sufficient resources, the practitioner can begin to move blood gently to promote a bleed. Care is needed when needling a very thin person, especially on the chest, lower abdomen or upper back points. A combination of reinforcing technique on points to tonify qi and blood and even/reducing technique on points to regulate qi and blood is recommended.

- To regulate stagnant qi: Taichong LIV-3, Zhongdu LIV-6, Yanglingquan GB-34, Zhangmen LIV-13 and Qimen LIV-14.
- To nourish qi and blood: Taibai SP-3, Gongsun SP-4, Sanyinjiao SP-6, Zusanli ST-36, Ququan LIV-8, Zhongwan REN-12, direct moxa on Geshu BL-17 and Danshu BL-19 (the 'Four Flowers'), Ganshu BL-18, Pishu BL-20, Weishu BL-21.
- To calm the shen and root the hun: Yintang M-HN-3, Baihui DU-20, Sishencong M-HN-1, Shangxing DU-23 and Benshen GB-13, Hunmen BL-47 and Yishi BL-49.
- To move qi and blood in the abdomen and regulate the menses: Siman KID-14, Zhongji REN-3, Guilai ST-29, Qichong ST-30, Chongmen SP-12, Shangliao BL-31 to Xialiao BL-34.

Liver qi stagnation with accumulation of phlegm

In this pattern the patient often reports a strong desire to diet and an inability to stop fasting. She is typically very thin but is obsessed by the fear of gaining weight. She eats very little and may admit to secret eating and bulimia, with vomiting after meals. She will likely report that her periods initially became delayed and scanty before finally stopping. She is restless and easily frustrated or angered. She may complain of a stifling sensation in the chest and distention of the chest and hypochondrium with frequent sighing. There may be nausea, complaints of feeling heavy or muzzy-headed, and general signs of unclear thinking and confusion.

Tongue: Pale red with a greasy white or yellow coating.

Pulse: wiry (xian) and slippery (hua), or thin (xi) and slippery.

Treatment principles: Soothe the Liver and regulate Liver qi, transform phlegm to open the orifices

Prescription: Modified *Shun Qi Dao Tan Tang* (顺气导痰汤, Move Qi Smoothly and Guide Out Phlegm Decoction, from *Li's Medical Evaluation*, 1696)

Ban Xia (Pinelliae ternatae Rhizoma) 6-10g

Chen Pi (Citri reticulatae Pericarpium) 6-10g

Fu Ling (Poria) 10-15g

Dan Nan Xing (Pulvis Arisaemae cum Felle Bovis) 6-10g

Zhi Qiao (Aurantii Fructus) 6-10g

Xiang Fu (Cyperi Rhizoma) 6-12g

Mu Xiang (Aucklandiae Radix) 3-10g

Shi Chang Pu (Acori tatarinowii Rhizoma) 6-10g

Yu Jin (Curcumae Radix) 10g

Yuan Zhi (Polygalae Radix) 6g

Sha Ren (Amomi Fructus) 3-5g

Explanation: This formula transforms phlegm, regulates Liver qi, opens the orifices and stimulates the appetite so as to allow the body to begin to generate blood. The original formula transforms phlegm and restores the proper movement of qi using bitter-warm herbs such as Ban Xia and Chen Pi, along with Fu Ling to drain damp and strengthen the Spleen. Pungent-bitter-warm Mu Xiang and Chen Pi, pungent-cool Zhi Qiao and pungent-cold Yu Jin combine to regulate qi. Aromatic Mu Xiang and Sha Ren pierce turbidity and revive the Spleen. Pungent-warm Yuan Zhi and Shi Chang Pu harmonise the Stomach and promote appetite as well as acting on the mind to clear confusion. When the obstruction to the mental processes caused by phlegm and stagnant qi is addressed, there will be a beneficial impact on the eating disorder. Furthermore, when phlegm and stagnant qi are cleared from the uterine vessels and the appetite improves, the periods can be restored.

Modifications

- For nausea and vomiting, add (according to level of heat as indicated by tongue coating): aromatic-warm Huo Xiang (Pogostemonis/Agastaches Herba) 6-10g, neutral Pi Pa Ye (Eriobotryae Folium) 10-15g or mildly cold Zhu Ru (Caulis Bambusae in Taeniis) 10-15g.
- For extreme anxiety, change Fu Ling to Fu Shen (Poriae Sclerotium paradiscis) 10-15g.
- For insomnia accompanied by stress and agitation, add sweet-neutral He Huan Pi (Albiziae Cortex) 10-15g or sweet-cool Long Chi (Fossiliae Dentis Mastodi) 15-20g (decoct first for 20-30 minutes).
- Where there is severe agitation and anger and the tongue is red with a yellow-greasy coating due to Liver fire, remove warm Ban Xia, Chen Pi and Yuan Zhi, and substitute cold Bei Mu (Fritillariae Bulbus) 6-10g. Also consider adding bitter-cold Huang Qin (Scutellariae Radix) 10-15g, Zhi Zi (Gardeniae Fructus) 6-10g and/

or Mu Dan Pi (Moutan Cortex) 6-12g to clear Liver fire and move blood. Neutral Meng Shi (Lapis Chlorite) 10-15g can be added for stubborn phlegm.

- For constipation due to heat, add unprocessed bitter-cold Da Huang (Rhei Radix et Rhizoma) 3-10g, which not only loosens the stools but also eliminates damp-heat and moves blood, or sweet-cold Gua Lou Ren (Trichosanthis Semen) 20-30g.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture treatment is focused on regulating Liver qi, tonifying Spleen qi and resolving phlegm. If and when there is evidence of recovery (from verbal feedback and pulse diagnosis) and it seems there are sufficient resources, the practitioner can begin to move blood gently to promote a bleed. It is important not to promote the movement of blood too quickly since doing this prematurely will exhaust the patient's resources. Care is needed when needling a very thin person, especially on the chest, lower abdomen or upper back points. A combination of reinforcing technique on points to tonify Spleen qi and even/reducing technique on points to regulate qi and blood is recommended.

- To regulate stagnant qi: Taichong LIV-3, Zhongdu LIV-6, Yanglingquan GB-34, Zhangmen LIV-13 and Qimen LIV-14.
- To tonify the Spleen and resolve phlegm: Taibai SP-3, Sanyinjiao SP-6, Yinlingquan SP-9, Zusanli ST-36, Fenglong ST-40, Zhongwan REN-12.
- To calm the shen, root the hun and benefit the yi: Yintang (M-HN-3), Baihui DU-20, Sishencong M-HN-1, Neiguan PC-6, Shenmen HT-7, Xinshu BL-15, Shentang BL-44, Hunmen BL-47 and Yishi BL-49.
- When applicable, to move blood and regulate the menses: Siman KID-14, Zhongji REN-3, Guilai ST-29, Qichong ST-30, Chongmen SP-12 and Shangliao BL-31 to Xialiao BL-34.

Clinical notes

It is important to treat anorexia as early as possible to prevent long-term complications such as osteoporosis, tendency to miscarriage and intra-uterine growth retardation (IUGR), or in severe cases damage to multiple internal organs. In any of the patterns above, the injury to the Spleen and Stomach from long-term inappropriate eating habits is the primary pathology. Thus treatment should concentrate on harmonising the Stomach, stimulating the appetite, strengthening the Spleen and improving digestion in order to increase weight and help the woman's body reach a normal BMI. It is said that acquired essence from food nourishes innate essence (后天养先天, *hou tian yang xian tian*). When appetite and eating patterns improve, this will start to nourish Kidney qi and

jing-essence and regulate the 'Kidney qi/tian gui/Chong-Ren/bao gong axis'. When the Penetrating (Chong) vessel is full of jing-essence and blood, the menstrual cycle will return. If an eating disorder is treated early and body weight is increased by 10 per cent, it is possible for the periods to return. If the eating disorder has continued for many years and the patient is unable to gain weight, it is very difficult to achieve a return of the menstrual cycle. Since the emotions are a major factor in this disease, it is important that treatment calms and relaxes the patient. With the patient's trust in treatment, it is easier to help them overcome their aversion to eating. Practitioners should seek to reassure patients that the menses will come after a period of normal eating. In addition, they should encourage the patient to do moderate exercise to increase organ function and promote gastrointestinal recovery. Severe cases will likely require integrated treatment with orthodox medicine.

It is crucial not to try to move blood in order to instigate a period, since this is fundamentally a condition of depletion. Only when the pulse changes to slippery (*hua*), should practitioners remove any astringent herbs and add blood-movers such as Yi Mu Cao (Leonuri Herba) and Niu Xi (Achyranthis bidentatae Radix) to guide the menses downwards.

Case study from the clinic of Esther Denz

Elisa first presented at my clinic when she was 43 years-old. She had been trying to get pregnant for two and a half years. At the age of 40, an IVF cycle had produced only one egg. Her last FSH level was slightly high at 18 IU/L, although not unusual for her age. Because of the last IVF cycle and her age, her doctor recommended egg donation. She tried three rounds of donor egg transfers in Spain, none of which were successful, as her endometrium never built up past 6mm. She was now preparing for her fourth round and wanted assistance from Chinese medicine.

She was noticeably thin, with a body mass index (BMI) of 16.7. She seemed tense, and admitted to occasional episodes of depression. Her sleep was light and she experienced headaches and backache, especially around the time of her period. She also suffered from constipation. Her menstrual cycle was irregular - sometimes longer than 30 days and at other times less than 26 days. Her periods only lasted two to three days, with scanty, brown, clotted bleeding. Her pulse was thin and wiry, and her tongue was swollen and pale red, with a red tip and sides.

When I examined and treated Elisa, I noted her belly was concave and her ribs showed. We discussed the importance of regular meals. She gave evasive answers and seemed anxious about the topic of food, assuring me she ate very healthy meals. This behaviour is typical in anorexia patients, who often tend to try to conceal their disorder.

Based on the suspected anorexia, scanty and short periods, thin pulse, and symptoms during the menses (due to blood loss), I diagnosed Spleen qi and Liver blood deficiency. In addition, Liver qi stagnation - manifesting as an obsession with food, a wiry (xian) pulse and irregular cycles - was causing heat and blood stasis. The disturbed sleep, red tongue sides and tip indicated Liver and Heart heat with concomitant shen disturbance.

This article contains several excellent formulas for the treatment of anorexia. Here I would like to present the thinking behind the creation of the formula I used. Elisa's Stomach and Spleen had been weakened by constant over-thinking and worry, together with inadequate nourishment. Each treatment began with Elisa anxiously asking many questions, most of which I had previously answered. This overthinking was likely at the root of the blood deficiency. Because of the impending egg donation, I decided to treat immediately with acupuncture, using points such as Sanyinjiao SP-6, Qichong ST-30 and Tianshu ST-25 to nourish the Spleen and Stomach. Additionally, her blood was nourished through the use of the Four Flowers (bilateral Geshu BL-17 and Danshu BL-19). Elisa was very sensitive to needles, so we could use only a few points. Moxa was not used, as she complained about the smell. The treatment principles of her herbal formula were to nourish Spleen qi and blood, gently move blood, address Liver qi stagnation, and calm the shen. I gave her granules, six grams twice daily for a total of 12 grams a day. The herbal formula I used was as follows.

Long Yan Rou (Longan Arillus) 10g
Suan Zao Ren (Ziziphi Spinosae Semen) 10g
Mai Ya (Hordei Fructus germinatus) 10g
He Huan Hua (Albiziae Flos) 10g
Fu Shen (Poriae Sclerotium paradicis) 10g
E Jiao (Asini Corii Colla) 10g
Tian Men Dong (Asparagi Radix) 10g
Mu Dan Pi (Moutan Cortex) 10g
Lu Jiao Jiao (Colla Cornu Cervi) 10g
Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) 10g
Yu Jin (Curcumae Radix) 12g
Zhi Shi (Aurantii Fructus immaturus) 10g

Explanation

E Jiao, Bai Shao and Lu Jiao Jiao nourish blood. Dan Shen moves and cools blood gently and calms the shen. Suan Zao Ren and Long Yan nourish the Heart and Liver blood, helping sleep disorders arising from blood deficiency. Yu Jin and Mu Dan Pi clear Liver heat and treat the Liver qi stagnation and heat evident in the wiry pulse and tongue with red sides, as well as the irregular cycle. Zhi Shi treats constipation and moves qi. Mai Ya is a crucial herb in the treatment of anorexia as it stimulates the appetite. Three herbs also had the secondary action of replenishing the endometrium - Lu Jiao Jiao, Tian Men Dong and Mu Dan

Pi (a special action of Mu Dan Pi taught by Dr Wu).

Elisa stayed on this formula for eighteen days, after which she had a more normal period, with fresh red blood and less pain and mood changes. Clotting was minimal. Her bowel movements also improved, though her appetite was still not very good, so I added Sha Ren (Amomi Fructus) 5g and Ji Nei Jin (Gigeriae galli Endothelium corneum) 10g. After this, she reported feeling hungry and started eating more. Subsequent weekly treatments over the next two months showed the tongue was becoming less red and the pulse less wiry.

After three months of treatment, Elisa visited her doctor and received some good news. The endometrial thickness had increased to nine millimetres, and her IVF could take place. Two blastocysts were transferred. This time, with a healthier lining, both blastocysts implanted. Elisa took the following formula after transfer and for the first three months of her pregnancy, again taking six grams of granules twice a day.

Tu Si Zi (Cuscutae Semen) 10g
Gou Qi Zi (Lycii Fructus) 10g
Shan Zhu Yu (Corni Fructus) 10g
Shan Yao (Dioscoreae Rhizoma) 10g
Bai Shao (Paeoniae Radix alba) 10g
E Jiao (Asini Corii Colla) 6g
Chai Hu (Bupleuri Radix) 6g
Nu Zhen Zi (Ligustri lucidi Fructus) 12g
Sheng Di Huang (Rehmanniae Radix) 10g
Mo Han Lian (Ecliptae herba) 12g
Bei Sha Shen (Glehniae Radix) 10g
Huang Qin (Scutellariae Radix) 10g

Elisa developed signs of heat (nosebleeds) towards week 20 of her pregnancy and I started her on these herbs again with the addition of Di Gu Pi (Cortex Lycii Chinensis Radicis) 8g. She then continued taking herbs until the end of her pregnancy. After so many years of trying, it was a mental adjustment for Elisa to have twins on the way. The pregnancy was hard on her, but with support from a health professional and acupuncture sessions, she delivered healthy twins two weeks before her due date.

Most IVF protocols include oestrogen in some form. In my experience Chinese herbal medicine can support the effects of oestrogen. In patients like Elisa, without blood and yin nourishing herbs such as E Jiao (Asini Corii Colla), Bai Shao (Paeoniae Alba Radix), Lu Jiao Jiao (Colla Cornu Cervi) and Tian Men Dong (Asparagi Radix), oestrogen supplements can often not be utilised effectively. In addition the gentle blood-moving herbs such as Dan Shen (Salviae miltiorrhizae Radix), help circulate both medication and herbs throughout the body so they can have their required effects.

This article is from a forthcoming clinical manual on the treatment of infertility with Chinese medicine by Yuning Wu, Celine Leonard, Michael Haeberle and Esther Denz, to be published by the Journal of Chinese Medicine Publications.

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