

Integrating Whole-Food Supplementation and Western Botanicals Into the Acupuncture Clinic

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Chinese medicine is a path of healing that restores and maintains health. One primary aim is to increase the presence of life and health in a person, and help them manifest their unique destiny or potential as part of the whole of life.

As an innately holistic form of medicine, Chinese medicine is congruent with an approach to nutritional supplementation which uses concentrated living foods. The whole-food approach is consistent with the mindset and principles of Chinese medicine. Synthetic or fractionated vitamins, lacking life energy, are ineffective and potentially harmful. These synthetic vitamins are based in reductionist thinking, which conflicts with a holistic worldview and medicine. Indeed, foods and herbs in Chinese medicine are characterized for their energetic characteristics; warm, bitter, disperses liver *qi* and clears heat, for example. It is the energy of the food that counts more than its isolated nutrient content.

Published medical literature confirms the deleterious effects of synthetic vitamins, particularly the antioxidants. A representative and typical example is found in an [2007 article](#) in *JAMA*.¹ This was a systematic review and meta-analysis of 68 randomized trials with a total of 232,606 participants. The article reported, "In 47 low-bias trials with 180,938 participants, the antioxidant supplements significantly increased mortality." Specifically, "beta carotene, vitamin A, and vitamin E (alpha tocopherol), singly or combined, significantly increased mortality." Several other large-scale studies report similar results. It seems that the American habit of taking vitamin supplements, most of which are isolated chemicals, may be doing more harm than good.

With increased awareness of the questionable benefit and potential harm of synthetic supplements, more companies are labeling their formulas as "whole food." While this is a step in the right direction, there are concerns. Many of these formulas are primarily synthetic, with a few foods sprinkled in. One supplement company even adds synthetic vitamins to yeast, and calls the resulting mixture "whole food." Another concern is that almost all of the producers of "whole-food" formulas rely on outside growers for their foods. The quality and potency of food supplements is determined by the soil, water, growing and harvesting methods, and the manufacturing process used to make that food into a supplement. Post-harvest handling is crucial; in herbal preparations. This is where many quality problems arise.

Western herbs, like nutritional supplements, are viewed with suspicion by some Chinese medicine clinicians. With their recent focus more on phytochemistry and Western physiology than energetics, and their relatively simple (even single-herb) formulas, Western herbs are, at times, considered primitive and inferior to the Chinese herbal practice. Compounding this are major concerns with standardized extracts. Most are standardized through chemical alteration, and considered inferior to whole-herb extracts. However, many acupuncturists choose to incorporate Western herbal medicine in their approach to patient care once they understand there are full-spectrum formulas manufactured with the principle that the whole herb is the active ingredient.

Quality and standardization come through rigorous raw material selection and the intelligent application of traditional processing methods.

Another key to including Western herbs in an acupuncture clinic is becoming knowledgeable about herbs that have no counterpart or equivalent in the Chinese herbal pharmacy. Echinacea stands out as the most significant Western botanical that has no Asian analog, even in the incomparably huge Chinese herbal medicine materia medica. Echinacea is a natural addition to the Chinese herbalist's toolbox once it is understood that it has wide application and great benefit. In addition to echinacea, there are a wide range of botanicals from around the globe which can complement the acupuncturist's traditional modalities without compromising the integrity of Chinese medicine practice. Ashwaganda, cat's claw, bacopa, boswellia, coleus and rhodiola are excellent examples of botanicals complementary to Chinese medicine.

Individualized treatment is a cornerstone of Chinese medicine philosophy. The ability to customize an herbal formula is often attractive to a practitioner of Chinese medicine. The flexibility to custom-blend a liquid herbal formula which includes Chinese, Western/eclectic herbs or both, is a great clinical advantage to a Chinese herbalist. Quality issues are significant for practitioners of Asian medicine who utilize herbs in their practice. Having had to face the facts of inconsistent quality, contamination, substitution, heavy-metal toxicity and the addition of Western drugs to some Chinese herbal products, acupuncturists and their patients can be confident using botanicals manufactured under pharmaceutical good manufacturing practices.

AOM can greatly benefit from incorporating complementary therapies congruent with its core principles. Whole-food supplementation and professional-grade Western/eclectic botanicals are two such modalities that hold great promise in improving patient care, clinical results and practice outcomes.

Reference

1. Bjelakovic G, Nikolova D, Gluud LL, et al. [Mortality in randomized trials of antioxidant supplements for primary and secondary prevention: systematic review and meta-analysis.](#) *JAMA* 2007 Feb 28;297(8):842-57.

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