

Oriental Medicine: A First-Line Defense

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Oriental medicine is new to many, but its ability to provide a superior first line of defense against most illnesses indicates the need for its better understanding by our patients and potential patients. Careful examination shows that Oriental medicine has far closer ties to Western medicine than most realize. Oriental medicine began 5,000 years ago with the insights of sages, expanded upon during thousands of years of observation and study. Those insights and observations led to concepts and therapeutic procedures that paralleled developments in Greek medicine, the foundation of Western medicine.

Oriental and Greek medicines developed similar concepts of the fundamental influences on an individual's health - four humors in Greek medicine, five elements in Oriental medicine - and both recognized that harmony and balance among these elements were the keys to a healthy life.

Hippocrates, father of Western medicine and the ultimate Greek physician, has been described as the founder of holistic medicine, for his medicine was a medicine of the mind, body and spirit. In China, physicians similarly understood the relationship among emotions, spiritual energy and the health of the body. Both systems recognized the impact of diet and the environment on health.

Oriental and Greek medicine developed similar diagnostic procedures. Newcomers to Oriental medicine are amazed at the diagnostic information Oriental physicians obtain by palpating a patient's pulses. Few are aware that Greek physicians were using and describing the same pulses and their use in diagnosis 2,000 years ago.

Western medicine turned away from Hippocrates in the second century A.D., primarily due to the influence of the Roman physician Galen, who sought to identify diseases and their treatment rather than focusing on the patient in his or her entirety. That separation widened when 17th century mathematician-philosopher Ren., Descartes declared the body to be separate from mind and spirit. From that time on, Western medical science has studied the body as a machine. Medical research has greatly expanded our knowledge of biological mechanisms, and a wealth of medical technology has been developed. The result is a Western scientific medicine that is laboratory-based and has a disease orientation. It excels in technology, diagnosis and the management of often life-threatening symptoms of acute illness, but it is limited to alleviating the patient's symptoms in many chronic conditions.

Oriental medicine, in contrast, continued the tradition of observation and the perfection of methods to restore the patient's balance and harmony in all aspects of the patient's physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Oriental medicine is patient-oriented, rather than disease-oriented. Oriental medicine detects and treats the imbalances that lead to an illness rather than focusing on the management of a patient's physical symptoms. It is particularly effective in treating chronic illnesses, often caused by a combination of the environmental, emotional and dietary influences that Oriental medicine has long studied. Oriental medicine helps restore balance within the patient's body and life with a variety of treatments: acupuncture; herbs; diet; energy-balancing exercises such as *qigong*; and

bodywork.

Oriental medicine, with its long record of success in treating chronic disease, is also highly effective in treating acute illness. Acupuncture - so useful in pain relief that it has been used for surgical procedures - is also a proven means of treating substance abuse and many other syndromes. With its ability to provide health care at a cost well below that of high-tech Western medicine, Oriental medicine is both a long-proven system of holistic medicine and a major community asset.

Oriental medicine complements Western medicine in many ways. By detecting internal imbalances, then restoring a patient's balance while symptoms are still minor, Oriental medicine can address causes and prevent the development of serious illness. The treatment of choice for many chronic illnesses, Oriental medicine is a low-cost way of treating many acute illnesses as well.

Technically-advanced Western medicine and holistic Oriental medicine are complementary medical systems, sharing similar heritages but each focusing on different aspects of medical care. There are emergency situations in which there are no substitutes for Western medical procedures. For most medical problems, however, Oriental medicine provides an effective, low-cost first line of defense against illness.

AUGUST 2002