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The use of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for pre-conceptual care

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Conceiving a baby is the most natural thing in the world, but unfortunately, it is not always the simplest. Between one in six to one in ten couples experience fertility problems. Behind those harsh statistics lies a particular kind of heartache that only would-be parents and those who work closely with them truly understand.

At the Zhai Clinic, our role is dedicated to helping infertile couples by enhancing their chances to have a baby. We treat both men and women using traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and over the past ten years, couples have come to us with every kind of fertility problem. Many of our female patients are in their mid-thirties to mid-forties. Some of our patients simultaneously undergo assisted conception programmes; others have no medical intervention other than the treatment they receive here. We are very proud of our success rates with both groups.

The Zhai Clinic

The Zhai Clinic specialises in the use of TCM to treat the full range of problems associated with infertility in both men and women including:

- hormonal and ovulatory problems
- polycystic ovaries
- endometriosis
- recurrent miscarriage
- unexplained infertility
- male infertility – including low sperm count, low motility, high abnormal form or antisperm antibodies.

Using Chinese herbs, acupuncture and other forms of traditional Chinese healing therapy, the clinic takes a holistic approach to reproductive health and offers sympathetic advice, well-researched treatment and a genuine message of hope to infertile couples.

All treatment is carried out under the supervision of Dr Xiao-Ping Zhai, who founded the clinic in 1993. A specialist in reproductive medicine, Dr Zhai

graduated in China and is fully qualified in both Western and Chinese medicine and draws on both disciplines to treat infertility.

She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and the British Fertility Society, and is respected by, and works closely with many Western fertility experts. Dr Zhai is a member of the Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine (UK) and is committed to promoting further research into the role of TCM in reproductive medicine. She contributes to professional journals and has been featured on radio and television and in national newspapers and magazines.

Many patients attend the clinic while undergoing assisted conception programmes elsewhere. Our work demonstrates that TCM can prepare both men and women for intrauterine insemination (IUI), in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) and other forms of assisted conception, thus improving success rates and reducing the number of treatment cycles required. TCM also increases the chances of a natural conception occurring.

In 2000, we undertook a study on 224 female patients aged between 29 and 48 who continued treatment for at least six months. Of these, 76% became pregnant – more than half of these naturally – and three quarters of these pregnancies resulted in a live birth.

Male patient figures for the same period show that among the partners of the 60 men who followed the minimum three-month treatment programme, 63% became pregnant – again more than half of them naturally – and 86% of the pregnancies resulted in a live birth.

Traditional Chinese medicine

TCM is a unique, distinct and independent medical system that has been practised in China for more than 5,000 years. It is still the medicine of choice in the country today, although Western medicine is practised alongside it.

Practitioners of TCM view the human body in an entirely different way from their colleagues in Western medicine. According to TCM, a person's health is determined by the state of their vital energy or *qi*. Any blockage in the pathways along which *qi* flows, or any imbalance in the two components of *qi* – yang and yin – can cause disharmony or disease.

Because the system has never involved dissection or experimentation with the human body, the internal organs are not seen as separate solid structures, but as interconnected functional units. Every malfunction in any part of the body has an underlying cause that must be addressed, and treatment will involve the whole person.

Before proposing a treatment plan, a TCM practitioner will take into account not only the patient's body, but also their mind, diet, exercise, external environment and lifestyle. At the Zhai Clinic, we use Chinese herbs, acupuncture and dietary modifications to clear up unhealthy energy patterns and restore depleted energy.

What to expect

The first consultation at the Zhai Clinic involves a diagnostic interview, which includes questions about medical history, previous investigations and general health. Practitioners of TCM use their sense of hearing, sight, touch and smell to obtain the information they need. They note the patient's skin, tongue, pulse and general appearance and possibly how they speak and how they smell.

Each patient is given an individual treatment programme, usually consisting of Chinese herbal medication and/or acupuncture. The herbal prescription may vary depending on the patient's needs at each stage of the treatment process.

Women usually continue with treatment until the third month of pregnancy or – in the case of recurrent miscarriages – until the patient has passed the time at which her latest miscarriage occurred.

TCM is a physically relaxing, undemanding form of treatment that fits easily into a normal routine and can be adapted so that patients can continue treatment while away from home on business trips or holidays.

Herbal treatments

The Zhai Clinic uses combinations of more than 300 herbs derived from the leaves, flowers, roots, stem and seeds of plants. Each herb has individual healing properties that differ when used in conjunction with others.

Herbal medication is specially prepared for each patient. The herbs are usually boiled and drunk as an infusion once or twice a day, though many can be taken in powder or tablet form.

Recent stories in the media have cast doubt on the safety of some imported herbs. The clinic uses only the highest quality herbs, dispensed under strict supervision by a reputable herbal company, which is a member of the Chinese Medicine Association of Suppliers (CMAS). Many have been used in medicine for over 1,000 years. Prescribed and used appropriately, they are safe and have few side effects.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture works by promoting the body's healing response. Fine needles are inserted into the skin at various points on the pathways along which *qi* flows. These stimulate the flow of energy through the body, helping to restore the yin/yang balance and bringing healing and well-being.

How long does treatment take?

The length and course of treatment depend on many factors including the cause and nature of the infertility and the way the individual patient responds. The average length of treatment is six and a half months. Among our female patients who became pregnant, this occurred within three months for 25%, three to six months for 30%, six months to one year for 39% and more than one year for the remaining six percent. Of our male patients, whose partners became pregnant, 37% achieved success within three months and a further 53% within six months with only ten per cent taking more than one year. The average length of treatment is four and a half months.

Treating infertility with TCM

Because TCM aims to restore balance to the whole person, it can be used to treat all non-genetic causes of infertility in both men and women – either in conjunction with modern assisted fertility techniques or on its own.

In women, TCM can help with hormonal and ovulatory problems, polycystic ovary syndrome, endometriosis, partially blocked fallopian tubes, unexplained failure to conceive and repeated miscarriage. In men, it can improve sperm count and/or sperm motility.

In women

- TCM recognises that many ovulatory problems can be resolved if the menstrual cycle is regulated. TCM attempts to balance the body's yin and yang while regulating *qi* and blood flows during the menstrual cycle.
- TCM can improve egg quality and strengthen the lining of the womb, so increasing the chances of successful implantation. This is particularly relevant in older women and most of our female patients are aged between 34 and 44.
- TCM can reduce levels of circulating FSH (follicle stimulating hormone). Women with high levels of FSH are often turned away from fertility clinics because they generally respond poorly, if at all, to the drugs used to stimulate their ovaries for IVF treatment. Many fertility specialists regard this condition as untreatable and advise women to consider using donor eggs. Experience has shown that when these women follow a course of TCM, their FSH levels may fall, improving their chances of success in an assisted conception treatment cycle using their own eggs.

In men

Herbs have been shown to significantly improve the production of healthy sperm by balancing and strengthening the functions of the male reproductive organs. In many cases, treatment with TCM has increased the number of sperm produced and improved sperm quality.

As a result, patients undergoing assisted conception can opt for less invasive procedures than might otherwise be possible. For example, in severe cases of male infertility, the recommended treatment is ICSI which involves the

microinjection of a single sperm into an egg. When more healthy sperm are produced, patients can attempt less invasive and less expensive procedures, such as IUI or IVF.

TCM and assisted conception

Even the most sophisticated assisted conception techniques can benefit from a helping hand. Whatever the nature of the fertility problem, TCM can maximise the chance of success when undergoing IVF or another assisted conception programme. In women, success rates can be enhanced by improving egg quality, strengthening the uterine lining and balancing hormone levels to give patients the best chance of achieving and maintaining a pregnancy. Where male sperm production is a contributory factor in childlessness – as it is with 50 per cent of couples – TCM can often produce a significant improvement.

Case history

All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Case 1

Jane was 32 years old and had tried unsuccessfully for two years to get pregnant. Her partner's semen tests were normal, but her FSH level was raised. She began IVF treatment and, although she produced 13 follicles, only one egg was collected which did not fertilise. She was told by the clinic that it would be highly unlikely that she would conceive with her own eggs.

After reading an article about treatment with TCM at the Zhai clinic, she decided to give it a try. After three months of herbal medicine and acupuncture, she fell pregnant naturally. Subsequently she went on to have another pregnancy and now has two healthy children.

Analysis: Jane was a professional career woman in the medical field, working hard and long hours. It was no surprise to me that her general health was not as it should be. I designed her treatment to improve her general well-being and regenerate her reproductive system. Jane responded incredibly well, probably because she was relatively young and her reproductive organs were not severely affected, making it easier to restore them to full function.

Case 2

Jenny was 40 years old with a 10-year history of infertility. Her husband Paul also suffered from infertility with an extremely low sperm count. The couple had undergone nine IVF/ICSI attempts without success. Jenny produced on average four to five follicles but only one egg was retrieved each time. When ICSI was performed it occasionally resulted in an embryo but this did not implant.

When she began TCM treatment, Jenny's plasma FSH was raised, but this dropped after eight months. The couple embarked on an IVF/ICSI cycle but failed to conceive. Jenny continued on TCM for a further eight months. Although her FSH level was still slightly elevated, Jenny's health and reproductive condition were both satisfactory from the TCM perspective, so Dr Zhai suggested that she attempt another ICSI cycle. On this occasion, she produced five follicles with five eggs retrieved, of which three became embryos. Jenny finally gave birth to healthy twins.

Analysis: This case was quite a challenge as the couple had a long

history of infertility. Although Jenny had reasonable follicle development, it was vital to help Jenny to produce good quality eggs to increase the chances of fertilisation, as I felt the couple's previous ICSI cycles did not achieve good fertilisation.

Case 3

Richard had a very low sperm count, between zero to three million sperm per ml. He stopped smoking, restricted his alcohol intake and had a course of reflexology. He and his partner underwent ICSI and were successful on their first attempt. When their daughter was one year old they decided to have another go at ICSI, but to visit the Zhai Clinic first. Within four months of starting treatment, Richard's sperm count had risen to 26 million per ml. Soon after this, his partner discovered that she was pregnant naturally.

Analysis: Richard was in his early 40s. He had a normal endocrine profile and no other significant finding to explain his poor sperm production. It was vital to nourish and balance his general well-being. He responded to the treatment slowly but consistently. His

sperm count increased from zero to 0.1 million/ml after 4–5 weeks of herbal treatment and to 1 million/ml after 9–10 weeks. It then dramatically increased to a normal semen sample.

Case 4

Laura was 43 years old with a 5-year history of infertility. She had had two IVF attempts but in each case, she failed to respond to the drugs and no follicles developed. Her FSH was normal before IVF but she had low levels of oestrogen.

Four months after starting TCM, Laura had artificial insemination (IUI) with her husband's sperm during a natural cycle. Her cycle was carefully monitored at a fertility clinic and she became pregnant after her second attempt. Unfortunately, she miscarried at 11 weeks. After five months she tried another IUI cycle, this time using ovulation induction drugs. She became pregnant again, but sadly miscarried at 13 weeks. However, after a further six months of TCM treatment, and two unsuccessful IUI attempts with ovulation induction, she successfully conceived on her third attempt at a natural cycle IUI, and gave birth to a healthy baby girl in 2000.

What our patients say

- "We are absolutely delighted as after five years, six IVF treatments and having finally been told that IVF was not going to work, we were getting somewhat desperate! Chinese medicine offered us a way of hope and we went on to produce two miracle babies, when all Western approaches had failed. We would be keen to share our experiences in the hope that it would give other childless couples an opportunity they might otherwise miss."
- "Trust Dr Zhai, believe in her extraordinary skills as a doctor, follow her advice and I am sure that you, like us, can one day hold your very own little miracle."
- "I wanted to tell you how grateful I am to you. I strongly believe that our son and daughter would not be here if it was not for your help. I believe that you have to have faith in someone or something to get through all the awful traumas involved with IVF treatment and in my case it was you."
- "My husband and I were under the care of a London hospital for seven years trying to find out why I couldn't conceive then they finally gave up on us after five years with seven IVF cycles. After only three months treatment I am amazed that we are now expecting a baby... I still cannot believe how Dr Zhai can treat me so easily... I just wish someone had told me years ago, then we wouldn't have suffered all the heartache."
- "We would like to express our sincere thanks and eternal gratitude for all your help and treatment with our endless fertility problems. Our nine years wait has ended and dreams have now been realised."
- "After nine IVF attempts I am absolutely convinced that the treatment I had with you made all the difference this time."
- "Thanks to your treatment my egg quality improved dramatically. We had eight eggs, seven of which fertilised and for the first time they were grade 1 quality. I am now 11 weeks pregnant. Thank you for all the help and support which you have given to us, we are very grateful."
- "While Dr Zhai's herbs were not the most tasty drink in the morning and evening, the acupuncture was relaxing and painless. Dr Zhai's approach helped to make me feel in control again, giving me ways to improve my chances of conception rather than handing over all control to advanced medical techniques. All in all the 'treatment' she offered was not traumatic or intrusive and the result was a huge success!"

Analysis: Laura had a long history of 'ME' and according to TCM, her internal system was damp and so heavy that her blood flow and energy was not able to regenerate. She felt tired all the time and her tongue was pale with a thick coat. Her IVF history together with her age was not at all encouraging. Our first step was to treat her with TCM and then put her on a monitored cycle to see

whether she could produce a follicle after her system had improved. Although she conceived on her second IUI attempt, the pregnancy miscarried. This indicated that her poor general health not only affected her egg production, but also the blood supply to her womb lining. The treatment emphasis shifted to energising the

blood flow and warming her womb, and eventually she was successful.

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