



# alternative therapies

## The Role of Traditional Chinese Medicine in the Treatment of Infertility

**Despite the fact that modern medicine can achieve near miracles, infertility is still a major, continuing problem which affects approximately one in six men and women in Britain and most other Western societies. Whether the causes are functional or organic, failure to conceive all too often leads to a sense of terrible isolation; it hurts to be childless in a world geared to families.**

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which is best known in the U.K. for its effective treatment of allergy related chronic conditions, also has a long, if less well known history in the treatment of infertility. Over a decade of clinical experience has proved to me that it has much to offer infertile couples and a considerable contribution to make to reproductive medicine generally. With the growing popularity of TCM in this country an increasingly significant number of infertile couples have welcomed and experienced the efficacy of Chinese medicine.

A combination of acupuncture and herbal medication is used and the Chinese specialist is able to call on hundreds of different herbs, each with their own unique function, smell and flavour, which will help to harmonise the body's Yin/Yang balance, (i.e. the two opposing yet complementary sides of nature). Some, like Ginseng, are powerful enough to stimulate the endocrine system which regulates the hormone output in men and women. Others are capable of directly improving the function of the sexual organs. There are also many herbs with which to treat patients with a history of repeated miscarriage.

Acupuncture is as important as herbal medication in Traditional Chinese Medicine. There are 12 major meridians or channels through which the body's energy or 'Qi' flows. They connect with all the major organs. There are a further 2 important, unpaired meridians, the Conception and Governor Vessels, which are the main energy channels supplying the body.

The meridians used to treat infertility are those connecting with the kidneys, spleen and liver, plus the two unpaired meridians which run vertically along the midline of the body, starting between the lower legs and continuing upwards to the top of the head. It must be borne in mind that the Chinese view of the human body is very different to conventional Western anatomical concepts and these organs play a vital role in TCM, particularly in reproductive medicine. The kidneys are regarded as the foundation for growth and development before birth and are closely linked to the hormone/sex glands; they contain the genetic blueprint of the next generation. The spleen is regarded as the foundation of life after birth, providing nourishment for growth and is closely linked to the digestive system. If this organ does not function properly the body will become malnourished and development will be arrested.

The liver is regarded as one of the principal organs, responsible for maintaining the harmony and the free circulation of 'Qi' throughout the body, thus ensuring the smooth and efficient functioning of the entire system. It is sometimes compared to a sea of blood because of its capacity to store blood and to adjust its volume to meet the body's varying needs.

Although some Western and Chinese medical theories may seem a world apart, occasionally there is more of a connection than first meets the eye. TCM advocates that fertility starts in the brain and moves down to the kidneys and thence to the male/female reproductive organs through the meridian channels. Western theory also decrees that fertility is ultimately

governed by the hypothalamus, part of the brain above the pituitary gland, which controls the production of hormones and therefore the behaviour of the ovaries in the female and testes in the male. However, once a patient's full case history has been taken during the initial consultation, and any appropriate conventional diagnostic investigations have been undertaken, the two disciplines begin to move apart. TCM diagnosis and treatment is based on observation of the patient's facial colour, the condition and colour of the tongue, pulse taking, appearance and general demeanour. Careful consideration of all these elements is crucial before any treatment commences. In TCM there is always a reason for any part of the body not functioning at par. The Chinese answer to the problem is to address the whole person in order to seek out and restore the culprit imbalances in the system.

### **TCM can be used to regulate ovulation**

Ovulation is vital for pregnancy. In the female the successful release of a mature egg from the ovarian follicle (ovulation) is essential for conception. Any malfunction in the process is likely to cause infertility problems, including unexplained infertility, to some degree. However, such hormonal complications can often be regulated during the menstrual cycle. As is the case with Western medicine, TCM recognises four phases of the menstrual cycle; the menstrual phase, the post menstrual phase, ovulation and the pre-menstrual phase. Conventional treatment is hormone based; TCM treatment includes herbal medication/ acupuncture to balance the kidney Yin/Yang and to regulate the Qi and blood during the cycle.

### **Post Menstrual Period:**

Between days 4-14 of the menstrual cycle the follicles develop and produce an increasing quantity of oestrogen. At this point it is important to build the Yin Jing (the essence of life stored in the kidneys) to ensure the healthy growth of all 20 or so of the follicles. It is also important to ensure the correct balance of Yin/Yang because if the Yin is insufficient, the opposing Yang will produce too much heat and disturb the growth of the developing follicles. As the increased oestrogen enters the blood stream the pituitary reduces the FSH output. This means that there is only sufficient for the one, most advanced follicle to grow to maturity.

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