Acupuncture in a Rehabilitation Setting: Wu visits Wuhan

Kit Wu

Introduction

Chinese medicine has always been a part of my family culture; my parents have more often than not taken me to a doctor specialising in traditional Chinese medicine for minor ailments that I suffered as a child. Their unrelenting faith in Chinese medicine and the unavoidable media attention on alternative therapies in recent years have led me to search the knowledge outside my medical curriculum. My interest in acupuncture was confirmed after attending the BMAS foundation course in medical acupuncture. Wishing to pursue this further, I arranged to do a three-week acupuncture elective in Tongji Medical College, Wuhan, China, during my last summer holiday of medical school.

I was filled with excitement and anticipation as the plane landed in Wuhan, although three weeks was not long, and the objectives I had set out to achieve on the trip were many. I mainly sought a deeper understanding of acupuncture, and its practice in a traditional Chinese medical setting. Furthermore, I wanted to have the opportunity to practice acupuncture, as the chances for practice as a medical student in England are slim. In addition, this trip would give me a refreshing break, and allow me to meet new teachers and friends from different backgrounds.

Medical Experience

Tongji medical college was initially founded by Dr Bolan (of German nationality) in 1907 as a German medical school, but subsequently evolved into a medical school predominated by the Chinese population. It was later moved from Shanghai to Wuhan and became a college under Hua Zhong University of Science and Technology. The medical college and its affiliated teaching hospitals enjoy a reputation as the third largest and best equipped for western and traditional Chinese medicine in the whole of China. It also has many international links, and is the key university in cultural exchanges between China and Germany.

I was given the opportunity to work in the rehabilitation department in Tonji Hospital, the main teaching hospital affiliated to Tonji Medical College. Set in the heart of the city, the location of the hospitals allowed it to act as a tertiary referral centre for a metropolitan community and its surrounding area in the middle region of China. The department of rehabilitation science is one of the largest, and one of the first of its kind in China. The department of rehabilitation science is one of the largest, and one of the first of its kind in China. The unit incorporates both western and traditional medical principles to help its patients restore their best state of health and function. A complete multi-disciplinary team was also employed for each patient that required the help of

Summary

This paper reports the personal experiences encountered by the author (a medical student) on an elective period at a large rehabilitation unit of Tongji Hospital in Wuhan, China. The author had the opportunity to learn the principles of traditional Chinese medicine and practise blunt needling under careful supervision. This elective experience illustrated, for the author, how acupuncture can be used alongside western medicine to restore patients to their optimum state of health.

Keywords

Acupuncture, China, rehabilitation.
physio- and occupational therapists. Patients were referred from other departments or hospitals and many were victims of road traffic accidents. Acupuncture was used as a form of therapy for different reasons. For patients paralysed from spinal cord injuries, electroacupuncture was used to stimulate muscle movement and to prevent muscle wasting. For patients recovering from stroke, head acupuncture was employed to help circulation of qi around the body and to the weaker side, electroacupuncture was utilised at the same time to restore qi to the weaker side. Patients with other illnesses such as multisystemic TB and reflex dystrophy requested it for pain relief.

During my elective, I had the privilege of shadowing Professor T Li, originally a consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology, who, after the Cultural revolution, retrained in Chinese medicine and acupuncture out of personal interests. Most of the patients stayed in the wards for a period of a few weeks in order to receive the full range of treatments on offer. Acupuncture for different patients was carried out in a similar manner to a ward round, with two or three students tagging along her instead of nurses. Professor Li would first review the history and assess the progression of recovery. She would then feel the pulse and examine the patient’s tongue, revise and reassess the acupuncture points used for previous treatments. The management plans were explained carefully to eager students, and occasionally she would ask us questions in relation to the condition and its acupuncture treatment (similar to how consultants grill students on a ward round!).

Professor Li, myself and my two fellow students who study at the Medical College, carried out the treatment. As I had little practical or theoretical experience in this field at the start of the elective, Professor Li would kindly guide me through the principles behind her choice of acupoints. I was more or less being thrown in at the deep end from the start when she asked me to do blunt needling under her careful supervision on the afternoon of my first day! Through continued practice, however, I became increasingly confident in finding the correct acupuncture points and manipulating blunt needles. Although many other forms of rehabilitation therapy were used alongside acupuncture for patients that were admitted to the ward, there is no doubt that acupuncture played an important therapeutic role. This can be seen as patients noticed an improvement in their mobility as well as their pain.

Management of the patients was essentially the same as that in England, where patients would be under the care of a team of doctors led by a consultant. However, many of the duties undertaken by nurses in the UK, such as dressings, washing the patient, and helping with feeding, were performed by family and friends. Although the hospitals are government owned, patients are...
I wanted to learn as much as possible in the three weeks, so I spent most evenings studying the core textbooks in acupuncture and the principles of TCM. In addition, Professor Li kindly used her spare time between patients to outline and explain important concepts. A few days on, I was able to appreciate the different types of pulse and interpretation of tongue with various illnesses. More importantly, Professor Li would emphasis that acupuncture is a form of treatment within TCM and that without the correct diagnosis, the holistic treatment of the patient could not be achieved.

Outside the Hospital
Wuhan is an industrial city with many historic monuments as it was the starting point of the Cultural Revolution, but with little time outside the hospital, my sightseeing was limited to within the city. The people on campus and in the hospital befriended me. I was taken to see the famous Yellow Crane Tower, from the top of which the view of the whole city can be admired. The Yangtze River runs horizontally across the city, and its beauty was another great attraction I visited.

Wuhan is a true gourmet’s paradise. The road outside the Medical College was filled with hawker stalls after sunset, and thus my dinners were always delightful. One of my most vivid memories of my short stay in Wuhan was sharing different dishes with my newly met friends at small restaurants serving authentic Chinese cuisine, discussing endlessly our experiences of that day.

Conclusion
This elective was most rewarding and worthwhile. I gained extensive knowledge and experience in practical acupuncture and Chinese medicine, and witnessed Chinese acupuncture truly as a form of ‘complementary’ therapy, which worked synergistically with western treatments. Thus it provided me with the perfect example of how both fields can be combined for the benefit of the patient. Moreover, it has given me the confidence to refer to, or practice, acupuncture for future patients when numerous orthodox treatments have failed. Overall, I achieved more than I hoped for, and I had a great time at Tonji. The trip enlightened me in more ways than I expected – it contributed positively to both my personal and professional development.

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