

Fibromyalgia and the path of pain

by Joel Whitehead

This chronic, debilitating condition refers to a group of non-articular rheumatic disorders characterized by pain, tenderness, and stiffness of muscles and of the areas of tendon insertion and adjacent soft tissue. The muscle stiffness and soreness is characterized by focal points of more acute actual inflammation (trigger points) as shown on the diagram. The actual diagnosis is made by the presence of up to 18 pairs of these trigger points in specified places on the body. Frequently there will be poor sleep, overwhelming fatigue, irritability, anxiety, bladder and urethral irritation, irritable bowel symptoms, and general malaise. This condition may be induced and intensified by physical or mental stress, chronically disturbed sleep, trauma, and exposure to damp or cold.



This is a new term in western medical circles, and unfortunately so many people have mistaken it for a solution. Many sufferers will tell you that it is not a solution, and to oriental thinking it isn't even consistent enough to be a syndrome.

There was a time when we went to the doctor's office with aches and pains that showed no swelling or visible deformations under x-rays, and the doctor, friendly enough, patted us on the back, asked us if there was another problem: were we lonely? Well, you could go home and take a hot bath, was the suggestion, and take some aspirin. Some offered something stronger. But we understood what the practitioner really thought of our complaints and we were ashamed that we were bothering them about pains that we could bear up under easily enough. Why bother the doctor about such a thing? "Just getting to that age, I guess!" As if aches and pains were a natural part of passage.

Now there is a name, little more, and you thank the practitioner for the name because it gives you an identity: "Gee, the doctor agrees that I have a problem. I just knew I wasn't crazy. What's more, there are lots of us... but we're still in pain!" And that's the dilemma, because a name is still not a solution.

What we've always known in Chinese medicine is that these pains fall into patterns. Moreover, we've always used the patients' own self-determination about what that pain is and how it feels to define what that pattern really is. Through 4,000 years of empirical observation of organ/meridian related syndromes, we've seen a clear record of what series of pains have what origins. Mostly, what we are seeing today in terms of Fibromyalgia is a combination of these.

First of all it would be important to understand that among these syndromes some are excess syndromes and some are deficiency syndromes. To understand this further it would help to think of the 'ex' in excess as meaning extra as in 'from the outside' or 'more than the average'. So we

of average health can get excess syndromes from the outside, meaning from weather or accidents etc. Often these are carried to us through a 'wind' (Chinese medically speaking) which results in symptoms that move around, and incidentally, and aversion to wind. We can also have normal health with paranormal or extra energy derived from within. This is harder to understand, and so the easiest thing to remember is that if it is not a deficiency, it is an excess. Excess people generally do not like to be touched and may have considerable duress to suffer through a massage.

One of the most common forms of excess is blood stagnation. Sometimes these people ache all over. It can originate with an excess such as a car accident or even just an emotional shock. Sometimes a car accident can be just that combination of physical and emotional trauma. Anyway, these people can ache almost anywhere you touch them. Often these sufferers can be extremely weak as well, which of course would be a deficiency. This can be the result of the excess cause, a lack of movement within the body, leading the body to become sluggish and tired. The opposite is often also a cause, meaning that of a deficiency leading to a lack of internal movement (of energy and blood) which leads to a sluggishness that creates a stagnation. It is not up to Chinese diagnosis to assess blame, but only to measure its present state of affairs. In turning the problem around we have to create internal movement and a new sense of harmony, so that whatever prevailed to stop the normal flow does not have the chance to predominate again.

Deficiency syndromes

If a person has a condition that is more purely deficient, they will like being touched, and so for these people the laying on of hands can give a real sense of amelioration of symptoms. To more permanently solve the problem, however, we must supplant the body's needs where the body is most lacking.

A *kidney deficiency* can be of two different types. The first is a yang deficiency. Yang is that energy that represents heat, light and movement and so the effect of this being deficient is that the person will be cold or even so much as to say, chilled to the bone. A yin deficient person will generally be hot or flushed, perhaps have night sweats (night is the property of yin energy, and if it is too weak it cannot control the yang forces as it should, and they escape), and in the extreme feel hot to the bone, a condition we call steaming bone.

A generally kidney-deficient person will be cold, and as the diagram shows, their aching predominates in the low back, the knees and ankles, the spine and possibly any joint, since kidney deficiency relates to the bones.

Spleen Deficiency — The Chinese spleen may actually pertain more to the pancreas in our western understanding. This person is going to be tired when a deficiency registers. They will not have much thirst, and may have frequent and looser bowel movements. They may also be anemic and colder as the long-term problem has been the inability to properly process and take nourishment from their food.

As a generally deficient person they may enjoy a total body massage, but the places that seem to bother them the most are on the left side. Aches are mainly noticed from the crux at the base of

the neck on the left side and down around the left scapular area into the lower thoracic area (also on the left). Further aching could possibly be noticed on the outer part of the left leg and lower leg to the outside ankle and foot. In general, these are the people who complain of muscle weakness and aching.

Excess syndromes

The *Liver and Gall bladder syndromes* are mainly right-sided. As Chinese medicine sees things in a cyclical fashion, the vicious cycle of this syndrome area is its clearest example. Stress and anxiety cause pain, the pain in turn causes the stress and anxiety.

In the same sense this has its roots and outlets in a series of foods that exacerbate the condition. Coffee is one, and I'm sure that all of us who abuse this drug see its application here. In our jitters we drink coffee and coffee provides us with the jitters. Its innocent-seeming relative, chocolate, is perhaps even more powerful in this respect, as well as being what I like to term an 'occlusive food'. Occlusive foods obstruct movement in the body, which also causes the Qi to 'ball up'. When Qi balls up this leads to an internal implosion. This is exacerbated in coffee and chocolate by this erratic and artificial speeding up of energy; a dam waiting to burst. Cheese is a big occlusive food, as are oils, almost ubiquitous elements of handy food these days. They are hard to avoid, in fact, and cause the gall bladder to overwork and succumb. But we need the functioning of the gall bladder to help us dissolve these fats and oils when they come to us in amounts that exceed the normal capacity of the body. Of course, when it is hurting it causes us pain and if it is the source of pain, the Western solution, like the eye in the Bible, to tear it out. To Oriental medicine though, the gall bladder meridian pain persists as does the syndrome, which should cause the victim to be even more careful about these foods. The tannins in red wine or even white wine for that matter have also been known to play a part.

A knot in the right shoulder, neck, and scapular area, or the hip and sciatica, on the right side, is so common that I never hesitate to suspect it. People of this pattern are light sleepers and wake up often through the night. It is the source not only of fibromyalgia in these areas but a whole host of other problems that branch off from it.

The *stomach* may be the last, but is perhaps the most predominant problem today. In terms picture, of the bullies of the body, the liver and gall bladder, while the stomach and spleen are in their weakened states. Just these two syndromes can equate to the number of sore points needed for a diagnosis of fibromyalgia and, I believe, is its most common form.

A postnote on treatment

Since some of my talks on this syndrome, many people have come to see me about treatment. If they follow through a course of treatment, usually eight to twelve sessions, the changes can be significant if not what they would consider complete. However, many people don't actively pursue the treatment either, because it is a serious treatment offering few consoling comforts or because of the costs involved.

When things have gone on for so long, there is little else to be done. Turning our lives around is never easy or painless, but if you are looking for a new start, salvaging your life from pain can be well worth the effort in pay-offs down the line.
