

The Taking of Herbs

It would be nice if herbs were a one off. "I took the herbs you gave me and the bad condition of my health that has been there for the last fifteen years is all cured. Thanks Doc!" As unlikely as this seems, this is what many people believe.

In a world where mainstream living is filled with advisory commercials to see your doctor about miracle medicines, the role of herbs is largely misunderstood. In a quick comparison of these two extremes, there is a lot we have to grasp to understand their individual roles.

Western medicines are *drugs*. They are refined substances. They rely on using only active ingredients if they are derived from natural sources and otherwise pure elements, a tradition since the days when doctors were known as chemists. So, when I give someone herbs and tell them to take five or ten pills three times a day, the patient harkens back to their western medical roots and screams overdose.

Actually, herbs are probably closer to being a concentrated food source that presents a particular energy. In Chinese medical herbology we categorize the herbs not only in terms of function, but flavor, energy, whether they are hot, cold or more medium in temperature, what organs they go to and what other herbs they are synergistic with. Today, western herbologists are starting to employ the same systems.

The reason herbs are safe is that we use the whole part of the plant. The roots, the leaves, the stems and or the bark could all have different uses and different energies. Within the complete use of the herbs are things that also prevent them from being toxic. When they are refined and only employ active ingredients side affects are more likely.

Of course where we have to be careful is to use the appropriate herbs for the appropriate situations. For instance, if a person is already too hot in nature we would avoid using an herb that would increase their temperature. In the case of a pregnant woman we must be careful not to use herbs that break up blood stagnation or herbs that force the energies down. If a person was suffering from a blocked energy that causes pain, we would use herbs that break up stagnation of energies or blood or both. If we gave them herbs that made their energies stronger, it would probably make the pain worse. More about this later.

Acute or Chronic

There is a big difference between the way we approach a problem that is acute and one that is chronic. Mostly, when we think of something acute, we think of colds and flus and recently incurred injuries. The herbs we would use in this case would be considered temporary in use. For instance, at one time, if someone was suddenly beset by a cold energy blocking the function of the lung, we would use an herb called *MaHuang* or ephedra to expand the lung and cause sweating to drive out the cold. We were heavily admonished not to use the herb more than once or twice as it tends to weaken the patient if used too much.

When western pharmaceuticals got hold of it they of course refined it to its active ingredient only, called ephedrine. Not only did they use it for cold medications, but diet pills as well. Soon people were abusing it and then eventually it was taken off the market and branded as a poison and we weren't allowed to use it either, even though we were

taught to have great respect for the harm that it could do. It was an herb only meant for acute applications as many herbs are, but used incorrectly it was branded a poison.

When a condition is chronic, in order to change energies that have been out of balance for a long time, we must use an herbal formula that is meant to change the energies slowly. We must take herbs for a time commensurate to changing these same energies. Many of my patients do not understand the careful delineation between these two extremes. Most people are likely to treat their conditions as a short-term problem and discontinue the herbal formulas once the acute part of their serious condition reaches a point of change where the symptoms are no longer critical. For instance, if a patient was taking herbs for damp heat, the presenting symptoms such as bladder infections or prostate or menstrual problems may clear up right away and the worst thing that can happen is that the patient would consider this an outright cure. Damp heat goes very deep and is very hard to get rid of. I always admonish people to stay on herbs for a long time in this case and to do a lot of lifestyle changes to completely rid themselves of this and similar conditions. However, most people feel that my concern is driven more by profit motive and less by altruism and concern for their overall health. Left to its own devices, an imbalance like this can go much deeper and eventuate in conditions of stagnation and growth such as cancer.

When does Balance become cure?

Cure is a nebulous term. As a continuation of what I was talking about before, most people consider amelioration of symptoms as a “cure, “ a word we must use with a great deal of qualification. When we are young and seemingly impervious to all except the occasional cold or flu or injury, we had no need to constantly assess our relative balance. As we grow older, the precariousness of our relative health or not can be a matter of controlling this balance. I often see the use of herbs to continue the work we have done as the final stage in the balancing of the patient. However, this stage can take a while in fully coming to terms with the chronic nature of the imbalance.

Moreover, we must keep an eye on the changes that are taking place for some time and know that when we take a break from the herbs as we often do, the patient must be aware of subtle signs that the condition is creeping back. If caught soon enough, a simple return to taking herbs may be enough, but if left to return to previous dysfunction, which would mean a return to treatment and more herbs than were used before.

Deficiency vs. Excess

Two great delineations in herbal therapy is whether a condition is deficient or excess in nature. If some condition is excess it usually means that the energies are sufficient, but that they are also blocked. We would herbs and or acupuncture to break up the stagnation and through the energy. If this involves something short-term like an injury, the process can be relatively short. If it is chronic it can be more long term and difficult.

When a condition is deficient, it can mean building up for a long time. Many people are kidney deficient almost by nature. My patients who have reckoned with this may be using herbs off and on for most of the time to stay out of pain and live an emotionally and physically optimal lifestyle. Those who stop taking herbs altogether often come back and complain of old pains as if it were a new event altogether..

Unfortunately, some of us will always be susceptible to the inability to maintain optimum strength and energy. Until we can find out why that is (allergies to essential nutrients etc.) the occasional or persistent use of herbs may be the best option.

In some cases a person can be both deficient and excess in their imbalance. In this case we sort of walk a line between these two extremes. If we spend too much time reducing the bad energy, we may lessen the base energy of the patient with it. If we do nothing but raise the energy of the deficiency we will make blocked energies worse, much like having more pressure behind a dam. If we do either without constant regard to the other extreme, the patient will get worse.

Sometimes a patient has very little energy and they suppose that this is because they are lacking in energy and therefore herbs to build up against their deficiency. However, it could just as well be the case that by removing some energy blockage we are allowing energy to move once again and thereby releasing the energy they feel they are lacking.

Conclusion

Herbs have their place. Because of the enigma of being something so new, people are likely to demand acupuncture or nesseshi treatment, where herbs may be the best option. Slowly changing our condition with herbs, could easily be the equivalent of getting treatment several times a week.

We will all tell you that herbal formulas that we prepare specifically for you are the best, because when you boil them and drink them they just infuse better. What didn't work about this is that it took awhile to cook up and because they tasted so horrid, people wouldn't take them.

Recently, we have started using a line of herbs that fairly approximates these herbs and are compressed into pills so that the patient will actually take them. The commercially packaged herbs, what we call "patent herbs," are effective for short term changes but are more transient in effect for changing energies over in a serious way. When economy is important, I will recommend them, but try to get the patient to switch to the high quality stuff if they are seriously trying to change their condition.