

Treating Female Infertility by Strengthening the Natural Menstrual Cycle with Acupuncture and Chinese Herbal Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Disorders of the reproductive and endocrinal systems are common causes of female infertility. The problems can be the result of organic or dysfunctional causes. The author analyses the pathogenesis of infertility, a common incident in the West, and the mechanisms of acupuncture and herbal medicine treatments. The article reports how TCM therapies, acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, are used together to treat infertility. Acupuncture plays a unique role, by supporting, stimulating and strengthening the self-regulating and self-healing functions and promoting ovulation. Chinese herbal medicine likewise can be prescribed according to the particular conditions, adapting to the individual case and following the stages of the menstrual cycle. If used together both TCM therapies will lead to a better clinical outcome compared to using them individually, i.e. using acupuncture or taking Chinese herbs on their own. The article finishes with some successful case histories where TCM treatment supported natural pregnancies and pregnancies assisted by IVF.

Keywords: Infertility, acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, menstrual cycle

INTRODUCTION

Disorders of the reproductive and endocrinal system, either organic or dysfunctional, are a common cause of female infertility. In the last ten years of my practice I found that more and more women with infertility became pregnant with the help of acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine, which improved their functional disorders or cured their organic diseases.

I recognised that it is a good choice to use acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine following integrated principles from both traditional and modern medicine, when treating signs and symptoms which are caused by disorders of the reproductive and endocrinal systems. If the optimum response can be achieved from the relevant reproductive organ following each phase of the menstrual cycle, it is possible to help women conceive successfully.

1. Background considerations for using TCM treatment to strengthen the menstrual cycle

1.1 Female physiological function explained by conventional Western medicine

A female should start a normal menstrual cycle when her sexual hormones and reproductive functions have matured around the age of 10 to 12. Under the influence of relevant hormones, like follicle stimulating hormone (FSH), luteinising hormone (LH) and gonadotropic hormone, produced by the hypothalamus and the pituitary gland, a follicle grows in her ovary each month, which then ovulates and moves to the uterus via the fallopian tube once it has matured.

If contact with a vital sperm has been made, the fertilised egg implants itself into the endometrium of the uterus and progresses to a normal pregnancy. If no contact has occurred, the follicle will flow out with endometrial tissue as part of a normal menstruation.

According to those terms I would classify a normal 28-day menstrual cycle, and arrange the treatment accordingly, in four stages:

Week one: Follicle growth.

Week two: The follicle matures and leaves the ovary (ovulation after 14 days).

Week three: Progesterone growth.

Week four: Preparation for either menstruation or, if conception has occurred, the protection of the foetus.

1.2 Social factors affecting females with infertility in the West

The following reasons can disturb the menstrual cycle and lead to amenorrhoea, dysmenorrhoea and other abnormalities of menstruation which are common pathological causes of infertility.

1.2.1 Long-term stress can depress the hypothalamus, pituitary and ovarian functions, leading to ovarian maldevelopment or early failure. Examples are young women suffering from amenorrhoea during times of high stress (such as doing high degree courses or reading for her PhD), or cases of mental disorder.

1.2.2 Over-physical work or training during puberty, as with young women in athletics or dancing, can cause maldevelopment of the uterus and ovaries leading to abnormalities of menstruation.

1.2.3 Excessive use of contraception can lead to an imbalance or decreased activity of oestrogen and progesterone. Some young women in the West take the contraceptive pill for over ten years, or they take it continuously, without allowing necessary menstruation in between.

1.2.4 Late marriage, or trying to conceive at an advanced age (over 35 years).

1.2.5 The use of drugs or toxicity in general.

However, almost 50 per cent of infertility is unexplained where the condition is at an early stage or pre-clinical. There may be a functional disorder without signs of organic disease which cannot be detected by the diagnostic means of conventional Western medicine.

Here treatment should be targeted to balance the hormones, to promote ovulation, to strengthen the relevant organs through each phase of the menstrual cycle, in order not only to regulate the relevant organic functions but also to rebalance the body as a whole.

2. Strengthening the menstrual cycle by using acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine

2.1 Basic treatment principles

Since following many academic discussions of various schools of TCM from traditional classic texts, as well as taking into account some theories from modern Western physiology and pathology, I find it serves us best to make a clear and accurate treatment protocol under the guidance of an integrated medical theory.

I look for the correct TCM treatment principle according to the different stages of the menstrual cycle. As Kidney deficiency is the main pattern for women with infertility, tonifying the Kidney becomes the key to strengthen the menstrual cycle. In general, I classify my patients into two categories according to the symptoms and pathological characteristics: Kidney *yin* deficiency and Kidney *yang* deficiency.

During the first week: Strengthen Kidney and Spleen, the pre-heaven and post-heaven organs which promote follicle growth.

TCM recognises that the Kidney is the initial source of the original and the reproductive *qi*. The Spleen is important for the continuous supply of *qi* and Blood. Hence I pay primary attention to strengthening Kidney and Spleen during the first week of the menstrual cycle.

During the second week: Nourish *yin*, culture Kidney essence and move stagnant *qi* and Blood.

Nourishing Kidney *yin* produces the essence for strengthening the maturing follicle. Releasing the stasis of Blood helps the matured follicle to detach from the ovary (ovulation).

During the third week: Warm *yang* and nourish *yin* to promote progesterone growth.

Zhang Jie Bin (Zhang Jing Yue) (Ming dynasty 1563-1640) believed that to strengthen the *yang* one must first nourish the *yin*, which refers to and explains the key TCM treatment principle of tonifying the Kidney. It means one should use herbs to warm the Kidney *yang* after nourishing the Kidney *yin*, or one should use both simultaneously. Strengthening *yang* in the Kidney meridian warms *qi* and Blood and clears stagnation and stasis of Blood in the ovaries and uterus, which promotes progesterone.

During the fourth week: Unblock Liver *qi* and Blood to regulate the menstruation; or strengthen Spleen and Kidney to protect the foetus.

During the last week of the menstrual cycle women easily manifest Liver *qi* stagnation creating Blood stasis and causing PMT and dysmenorrhoea. Hence it is necessary to move stagnant *qi* and stasis of Blood.

If fertilisation was successful and conception took place whilst the patient still suffers from deficiency of *qi* and Blood, miscarriage can easily occur. So if a woman has a history of miscarriage, or she has symptoms and signs of *qi* and Blood deficiency, the treatment should keep up tonification (of Spleen and Kidney) until a healthy pregnancy has been confirmed.

As TCM is capable of creating a good balance in the body, we can manage our treatments weekly and tailor the acupuncture points and herbal medicines according to the stage of the menstrual cycle. There is no need to match up treatment to the menstrual cycle day by day as is the case in Western medicine.

2.2 The use of acupuncture

Acupuncture is effective and should not be omitted in infertility. It is also a therapy which is accepted well by the British population. Therefore it is important and should be selected as a first-line treatment in women with infertility.

Acupuncture is used to:

- Stimulate and strengthen the self-regulation of hormones: Some women suffer with unexplained infertility which may have been caused by taking the contraceptive pill over a long period of time. Here the excessive intake of artificial oestrogen caused the vitality of progesterone in their body to be depressed. Hence they appear infertile, but no pathology can be found in blood tests. Acupuncture is effective at stimulating the self-regulating functions in their body to rebalance the hormonal disorder.

- Promote ovulation: Acupuncture is effective in promoting ovulation which has been proved by research.

• Strengthen the self-regeneration of the endometrium: Women with endometriosis may suffer from damage of the endometrium in their uterus due to excessive migration of endometrial tissue to other parts of the body. Their uterine endometrium may be roughened by scar tissue which makes successful implantation of the fertilised egg difficult. Acupuncture, especially when given with moxibustion, will strengthen the self-regeneration of the endometrium which becomes softer with a better bio-circulation in the lining of the uterus.

Acupuncture treatment:

Main points:

Ren 8 *shen que* with moxibustion
 Ren 6 *qi hai*, Ren 4 *guan yuan* or Ren 3 *zhong ji*
 St 29 *gui lai* or St 28 *shui fen* or M-CA 18 *zi gong*
 Lu 7 *lie que*, Ki 6 *zhao hai*.

Points according to differentiation of patterns:

Priority of Kidney *yin* deficiency

(Liver *qi* stagnation and Kidney *yin* deficiency)

TH 5 *wai guan*, GB 41 *zu lin qi*
 Ki 10 *yin gu*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 2 *ran gu*, Liv 3 *tai chong*.

Priority of Kidney *yang* deficiency

(Spleen *qi* and Kidney *yang* deficiency)

St 36 *zu san li*, St 25 *tian shu*, Sp 9 *yin ling quan*,
 Sp 6 *san yin jiao*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 6 *zhao hai*.

2.3 Basic theory and prescription of herbal medicines:

Chinese herbal medicine is commonly used to support acupuncture treatment. Together both of them will help the individual patient to reach the expected treatment outcome. In many cases women received regular acupuncture alone for over a year. Whilst they felt better in themselves, they were unable to conceive since the treatment was insufficient, despite the fact that the acupuncture had been carried out correctly.

Chinese herbal medicines can be selected in various forms:

1 As patent herbal formulae: Although we can no longer use patent preparations due to legal restrictions, we can prescribe our treatment with reference to these famous ancient formulae.

2 As concentrated herbal powders: These are suitable for individual prescriptions corresponding to the different stages of the menstrual cycle, which will make the effect more accurate.

3 As dry herbs for decoction: The latter possess stronger treatment power than powders, which makes them particularly suitable in organic disease or more severe, complex cases.

Treatment method:

According to the TCM differentiation of syndromes, the herbs will be selected following each week of the menstrual cycle.

		Priority Kidney <i>yin</i> deficiency		Priority Kidney <i>yang</i> deficiency	
	Treatment principle	Patent formulae	Herbs for decoction	Patent formulae	Herbs for decoction
First week	To tonify Kidney + Spleen to promote follicle growth	<i>Gui Pi Wan</i> / <i>Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan</i>	<i>Nu zhen zi han lian cao he shou wu gou qi zi</i> etc.	<i>Ba Zhen Wan</i> / <i>Wu Ji Bai Feng Wan</i>	<i>Xian mao yin yang huo xu duan tu si zi</i> etc.
Second week	To nourish <i>yin</i> essence and to move Blood stasis for better egg maturation and ovulation	<i>Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan</i> / <i>Tao Hong Si Wu Wan</i>	<i>Shu di huang dan shen tao ren hong hua</i> etc.	<i>Wu Ji Bai Feng Wan</i> / <i>Ba Zhen Yi Mu Wan</i>	<i>Dang gui zi shi ying tao ren hong hua</i> etc.
Third week	To warm <i>yang</i> and to nourish <i>yin</i> to promote progesterone growth	<i>Ba Zhen Wan</i> / <i>Jin Gui Shen Qi Wan</i>	<i>Shu di huang rou cong rong he shou wu gou qi zi</i> etc.	<i>Nuan Gong Yun Zi Wan</i> / <i>Bu Zhong Yi Qi Wan</i>	<i>Ba ji tian tu si zi dang gui</i> etc.
Fourth week	To move stagnant <i>qi</i> and stasis of Blood to regulate menstruation or to tonify Kidney + Spleen to protect the foetus	<i>Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan</i> / <i>Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan</i> / <i>Gui Pi Wan</i>	<i>Dan shen xiang fu chi shao zi lan</i> etc.	<i>Xiao Yao Wan</i> / <i>Xue Fu Zhu Yu Wan</i>	<i>Dang gui xiang fu chuan xiong ze lan</i> etc.

Note: 1 The protocol should start with the first day of menstruation.

2 You can prescribe individually or follow the patent formula as a guide.

3. The application of the above treatment principles of promoting the menstrual cycle in female infertility

The following conditions are particularly suitable for using acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine by finding the correct TCM treatment principles according to the different stages of the menstrual cycle (occasionally referred to in the case histories as 'promoting the menstrual cycle technique').

3.1 Unexplained infertility: She cannot conceive despite having received no clear diagnosis by conventional Western medicine, occasionally even without manifestation of symptoms

3.2 Early ovarian failure

3.3 Polycystic ovaries (PCOS) and amenorrhoea, or a prolonged menstrual cycle caused by an ovarian problem

3.4 Where the patient wants to conceive quickly, such as with advancing age (35 years plus), or for other personal reasons

In other words, we are talking about conditions where there is either no clear diagnosis or the condition is caused by an ovarian problem. If the problem is lower down, as in blocked fallopian tubes or endometriosis, the 'promoting the menstrual cycle technique' can still be used. Different treatment principles usually also apply, like moving Blood stasis.

4. CASE STUDIES

4.1 Natural pregnancy supported by acupuncture and herbal medicine

Case 1: Unexplained infertility

Ms C.A., a 27-year old physiotherapist, did not conceive for five years after getting married. The gynaecological consultant did all relevant examinations and the results were negative. Unexplained infertility was diagnosed and she was referred to TCM treatment.

Presenting symptoms: Stress, restlessness, she was weepy and nervous, worse in the time before her period, with minor dysmenorrhoea and constipation. Her menstrual cycle was regular (12, 4-5/26-28) with minor menstrual pain. She had an eight-year history of taking the contraceptive pill before she tried to become pregnant.

Light-red tongue with thin white coating and deep-wiry pulse. Her husband was fit with a normal sperm examination.

TCM differentiation: Liver and Kidney *yin* deficiency, *qi* stagnation in the uterus.

TCM treatment principle: To remove the stagnation of Liver *qi* and to nourish Liver and Kidney *yin*.

Treatment given:

Acupuncture: Moxibustion at Ren 8 *shen que*

Needles: Du 20 *bai hui*, Ren 6 *qi hai*, M-CA 18 *zi gong*, Sp 9 *yin ling quan*, Sp 6 *san yin jiao*, St 36 *zu san li*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 6 *zhao hai*.

Patent herbal medicines: *Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan* / *Xiao Yao Wan* were taken from the first day of her period until ovulation, *Ren Shen Gui Pi Wan* / *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan* were taken from ovulation to just before her next period.

Explanation: Because of some stress as a main symptom, the removing of stagnant Liver *qi* was the key treatment principle: *Xiao Yao Wan*, which removes stagnant Liver *qi* and strengthens the Spleen, was used in the first two weeks together with *Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan*, which nourishes Kidney *yin*. In the second two weeks *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan* was used together with *Ren Shen Gui Pi*, which focus on removing the stagnant Liver *qi* and strengthening Spleen *qi*.

Outcome: After five months of the menstrual cycle being supported by acupuncture and patent herbal medicines she conceived naturally and gave birth to a healthy boy after full term.

Analysis: This was a case of unexplained infertility where no organic disease could be found by conventional medicine. She remained in a pre-clinical condition which would be classified as a functional disorder. Clinically she showed only minor stress and premenstrual tension without other symptoms. This is the ideal scenario for the 'promoting the menstrual cycle technique' (see section 3 above). She gained a satisfactory result after regular acupuncture with some patent herbal medicines, which strengthened her natural functions by supporting her menstrual cycle.

Case 2: Infertility caused by premature ovarian failure

Mrs J.W., a 29-year old medical researcher with a PhD degree, suffered from irregular menstruation all her life. She had to take oestrogen pills in order to have regular periods. Once she got married she planned to get pregnant, yet she did not have her period for more than two years after she stopped the oestrogen pill. Her oestrogen was below 50, which is equivalent to menopause level. She was diagnosed as premature ovarian failure by her gynaecologist consultant.

Presenting symptoms: Depression, insomnia, nervousness, restlessness, etc.

Pale complexion, a light tongue with thin white coating and a weak pulse.

Due to being a medical researcher she initially had little confidence in TCM. After trying initial weekly acupuncture, with patent herbs added after three months, her oestrogen levels increased to 65. This changed her expectations and she put her trust in TCM. I changed her from patent herbal formulae to dry herbal decoctions while keeping up her weekly acupuncture.

TCM differentiation: Kidney *yang* deficiency with *qi* stagnation and Blood stasis.

Treatment principle: To strengthen *qi* and to warm *yang*, to remove *qi* stagnation and Blood stasis.

Treatment given:

Acupuncture: Moxibustion at Ren 8 *shen que*

Needles: Du 20 *bai hui*, Du 24 *shen ting*, Ren 4 *guan yuan*, Ren 6 *qi hai*, St 29 *gui lai*, Sp 9 *yin ling quan*, Sp 6 *san yin jiao*, Ki 10 *yin gu*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 2 *ran gu*, TH 5 *wai guan*, GB 41 *zu lin qi*.

Herbal medicine prescription: *Ai ye* 10, *xian mao* 10, *yin yang huo* 15-30, *he shou wu* 10, *dang gui* 10, *chi shao* 10, *tu si zi* 10, *zi shi ying* 10, *chuan xiong* 10, *xiang fu* 10.

Tao ren 10 and *hong hua* 10 were added around ovulation, *chai hu* 10 and *wu yao* 10 were added just before her period. Minor variations were made each week according to her general condition.

Explanation: *Ai ye*, *er xian tang* (*xian mao* and *yin yang huo*) and *tu si zi* warm and strengthen Kidney yang, *dang gui* and *he shou wu* nourish Kidney yin; *chi shao* and *chuan xiong* remove Blood stasis; *zi shi ying* promotes ovulation; *xiang fu* regulates stagnant Liver qi.

Tao ren and *hong hua* were added in the second week to emphasise the Blood circulation to promote the ovulation of the egg, but they were stopped after the third week; *chai hu* and *wu yao* were added in the last week to emphasise the moving and warming of Liver qi.

Outcome: Her oestrogen levels increased to 165 after 3 months of treatment when she began having regular periods every other month. She became pregnant after receiving TCM treatment for a total of 11 months. A healthy boy was born, right on term, whom she breastfed for 8 months. She then started her regular period and after 18 months she had another healthy pregnancy.

Analysis: This is a case of premature ovarian failure which belongs to the category of organic diseases. So the treatment with only acupuncture initially, plus patent herbal medicines, was not strong enough to target her problem. Since acupuncture and patent herbal medicines showed some effect, the patient started to have confidence in TCM treatment. Once she was given regular acupuncture, and the herbal decoction format that followed her menstrual cycle was prescribed (necessary in her case to make the treatment strong enough), her menstrual cycle recovered, she became successfully pregnant and she delivered a healthy boy. After a normal pregnancy her hormones rebalanced and she was cured from her premature ovarian failure. After she breastfed the first baby she had a second natural pregnancy without further supporting treatment and once again she delivered a healthy baby.

Case 3: Infertility caused by polycystic ovary syndrome

Ms H.W., a 32-year-old medical researcher, suffered from irregular menstruation for five to six years. Her menstrual cycle always lasted two to three months and occasionally she suffered with amenorrhoea. Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) was diagnosed after an ultrasound examination. She also suffered from a painful bad back.

Pale tongue with thin white coating, deep weak pulse.

TCM differentiation: Deficiency of both Spleen and Kidney qi and yang, with Blood stasis in the uterus.

Treatment principle: To strengthen Spleen and Kidney qi/yang, to warm the uterus and remove Blood stasis.

Treatment given:

Acupuncture: Moxibustion at Du 4 *ming men*

Needles: Du 20 *bai hui*, GB 20 *feng chi*, Bl 18 *gan shu*, Bl 20 *pi shu*, Bl 23 *shen shu*, Bl 31-34 (choose two pairs of *ba liao*) Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 2 *ran gu*, TH 5 *wai guan*, GB 41 *zu lin qi*

Patent herbal medicines: *Wu Ji Bai Feng Wan* / *Xiao Yao Wan* were taken in the first two weeks of her menstrual cycle, *Jin Gui Shen Qi Wan* / *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan* were taken in the second two weeks.

Explanation: Due to the associated back pain she was given acupuncture points on the back: Bl 18 and 20 to nourish Liver and Spleen yin and to strengthen Spleen qi; Bl 23 and Du 4 to reinforce Kidney qi and yang; the chosen two pairs of Bl 31-34 were used to strengthen Kidney and back; Ki 2 and 3 strengthen Kidney and remove dampness in the lower burner; TH 5 and GB 41 remove stagnant qi in general.

Xiao Yao Wan and *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan* remove stagnant qi from Liver and relax muscle spasm; *Wu Ji Bai Feng Wan* is used in the first two weeks of the cycle to support Kidney yang to help the follicle to mature in the ovary; *Jin Gui Shen Qi Wan* is used in the second two weeks to support conception.

Outcome: She was given regular acupuncture and patent herbs until her period regulated. After that she conceived a healthy baby boy. After two years she had another pregnancy, again with some TCM support.

Analysis: This was a case of early stage polycystic ovary syndrome, a predominantly functional disorder. She was given regular acupuncture and patent herbal treatment to regulate her menstrual cycle. Her period successfully regulated, which meant the function of her ovaries had been restored, so she was able to conceive and get pregnant a second time after that.

Case 4: Infertility caused by endometriosis, with failed IVF

Mrs C.W., a 29-year-old clerk, suffered from endometriosis which caused dysmenorrhoea. After she failed IVF twice she looked for help from TCM. She complained of stress, depression, insomnia, all of which became worse before her period. She had drops of blood with period pain on the first day of her period, followed by heavy flooding and severe pain from the second menstrual day onwards. She had to take painkillers to be able to cope with regular work and daily life during her period.

Light-red tongue with a red tip and thin white coating, wiry and tight pulse.

TCM differentiation: Liver *qi* stagnation and Blood stasis in the uterus.

Treatment principle: To move the stagnant Liver *qi* and to clear Blood stasis at the first stage; after that nourishing Kidney *yin* was added until she became pregnant.

Treatment given:

Acupuncture: Moxibustion at Ren 8 *shen que*

Needles: Du 20 *bai hui*, Ren 4 *guan yuan*, Ren 6 *qi hai*, St 28 *shui dao*, TH 5 *wai guan*, GB 41 *zu lin qi*, Sp 9 *yin ling quan*, Sp 6 *san jin jiao*, GB 34 *yang ling quan*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 2 *ran gu*.

Patent herbal medicines: *Xiao Yao Wan / Tao Hong Si Wu Tang* in the first two weeks of the cycle, *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan / Ba Zhen Yi Mu Wan* in the second two weeks.

Yue Yue Shu sachets:

During every period for relaxation (*hong hua* and *dan shen* remove the stasis of Blood; *rou gui* warms the Kidney and original *qi*; *dang gui* nourishes Blood; *san leng*, *e zhu* and *wu ling zhi* are stronger herbs to release menstrual pain; *yan hu suo* releases the abdominal spasm; *mu xiang* moves stagnant *qi* in the lower burner).

Tiao Jing Cu Yun Wan (regulating menstrual cycle and promoting pregnancy pills):

Used once the menstrual pain had lessened to promote pregnancy (*xian mao*, *yin yang huo* and *xu duan* warm and strengthen Kidney *yang*; *tu si zi*, *fu pen zi* and *gou qi zi* reinforce Kidney essence and promote ovulation; *huang qi* and *shan yao* reinforce Spleen *qi*; *bai shao*, *dan shen*, *chi shao* and *ji xue teng* remove stasis of Blood; *fu ling* and *gou teng* calm and relax the mind).

Explanation: This woman's endometriosis, which manifested clinically as unsmooth bleeding with dysmenorrhoea, appeared to be due to *qi* stagnation and Blood stasis. Endometrial tissues moved out of the uterus via the fallopian tubes and implanted themselves in the pelvic region. These tissues can stimulate the peritoneum to cause menstrual pain around and during the period. Acupuncture points and Chinese herbs were used mainly to remove stagnant *qi* and Blood stasis; Sp 6 and 9 nourish Spleen *yin* and are effective at treating constipation which accompanies endometriosis; Ki 2 and 3 nourish Kidney *yin* and can remove dampness; once her menstrual pain had improved, Ki 6 and 7 were added to strengthen and reinforce Kidney *yang*. *Xiao Yao Wan* and *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan* were used to move Liver *qi*, plus she used *Yue Yue Shu* sachets during the flow, which emphasise the removal of Blood stasis and the releasing of menstrual pain; *Tao Hong Si Wu Tang* is stronger in moving Blood stasis (first two weeks), whilst *Ba Zhen Yi Mu Wan* moves Blood more gently, but it also reinforces *qi* and Blood (second two weeks). After her pain eased, *Yue Yue Shu* sachets were replaced by *Tiao Jing Cu Yun Wan* for stronger pregnancy support.

Analysis: In this case of endometriosis some wounds and scar tissues had been produced in the lining of the endometrium, which can disturb the implantation of the fertilised egg, causing infertility. If these conditions of the uterus were not corrected, she would find it hard to conceive despite IVF. Acupuncture treatment and patent herbal medicines focused on moving the Blood stasis and increasing the bio-circulation in her endometrium and pelvis, which helped to relieve her of the menstrual pain she suffered with every period. Once this was achieved, nourishing the Kidney was added until she successfully had a natural pregnancy.

Outcome: Regular acupuncture and patent herbal medicines helped this woman to recover completely from IVF and to release her dysmenorrhoea. After that she successfully conceived to give natural birth to a healthy baby girl.

Case 5: Habitual miscarriages caused by excessive release of prolactin

Mrs C.F., a 35-year-old secretary, had three miscarriages during the last three years prior to coming for treatment. She was found to have high prolactin levels and her gynaecological consultant believed this to be related to stress. As it was not appropriate for her to have hormonal treatment, she was referred to try alternative and complementary treatment.

Presenting symptoms: She came to see me two to three days after her last miscarriage. She was stressed, depressed, weepy, with insomnia and abdominal pain. An internal pelvic ultrasound examination showed multiple cysts in both of her ovaries which were removed by laparoscopy.

She had a red tongue with thin white coating and a wiry-thin pulse.

TCM differentiation: Liver *qi* stagnation, Spleen *qi* and Kidney *yin* deficiency, with Blood stasis.

Treatment principle: To move Liver *qi* stagnation and Blood stasis, to strengthen Spleen *qi* and nourish Kidney *yin* deficiency.

Treatment given:

Acupuncture: Moxibustion at Ren 8 *shen que*.

Needles: Du 20 *bai hui*, Du 24 *shen ting*, Ren 4 *guan yuan*, Ren 6 *qi hai*, M-CA 18 *zi gong*, GB 34 *yang ling quan*, Sp 10 *xue hai*, Sp 9 *yin ling quan*, Sp 6 *san jin jiao*, TH 5 *wai guan*, LI 4 *he gu*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Liv 3 *tai chong*.

Patent herbal medicines: *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan / Ren Shen Gui Pi Wan*.

After her emotions calmed down, she was given a treatment with the herbal menstrual cycle supporting technique: *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan / Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan* in the first two weeks and *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan / Liu Wei Di Huang Wan* in the second two weeks. A sachet of *Tiao Jing Cu Yun Wan* was added to be taken every night.

Explanation: Aggravated by her repeated miscarriages this lady showed signs of stress, weepiness and abdominal pain which

are signs of Liver *qi* and Blood stasis. Furthermore fatigue and tiredness suggested Spleen *qi* deficiency. Hence acupuncture and patent herbs were given to move Liver *qi* and Blood and to strengthen her Spleen *qi*. A dry sachet prescription (*Tiao Jing Cu Yun Wan*) was added in the evening to promote pregnancy. Once she had calmed down the herbal menstrual cycle supporting technique was used, including herbs which support the Kidney *yin*, until she became pregnant.

Outcome: She conceived after half a year and carried on with treatment for protection of the foetus. When she arrived at full term, she had a healthy baby girl.

Analysis: This was a case of excessive prolactin levels which most likely were the reason for her multiple miscarriages. The many times of failed pregnancy increased her stress which further disturbed the prolactin levels. TCM believes that multiple miscarriages cause Liver *qi* stagnation and Spleen *qi* deficiency. If the deficient *qi* has not been corrected, the result would be further increased *qi* stagnation, hence this lady kept crying and having emotional ups and downs. The group of *Xiao Yao Wan* pills (happy pills group: *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan*, *Xiao Yao Wan*, *Jia Wei Xiao Wao Wan* and so on) have been a well tried treatment for reducing prolactin levels.

Due to her still suffering from minor signs of miscarriage, such as slight abdominal pain and pink vaginal discharge, which made her nervous and panicky during the early stages of her pregnancy, thinking another miscarriage may happen, *Xiang Sha Yang Wei Wan* and *Jing Gui Shen Qi Wan* (patent formulae) were added at night until the 12th pregnancy week, to tonify the Kidney, reinforce the Spleen and give protection to the foetus.

4.2 Successful IVF, supported by TCM

Case 1: Successful pregnancy with triplets after three failed IVFs

Mrs T.F., a 27-year-old trainer, tried and failed to get pregnant for more than five years. She was initially diagnosed with a blockage on her left fallopian tube and cysts on her left ovary. Her husband was found to have some antibodies in his sperm, which meant he was unable to fertilise his wife's eggs. A laparoscopy was performed to take the cysts away, but during the procedure it emerged that both of her fallopian tubes were blocked.

Both of them accepted TCM treatment and the wife had regular acupuncture and concentrated herbal powders to regulate her menstrual cycle.

TCM differentiation: Liver *qi* stagnation and Blood stasis.

Treatment principle: To move stagnant Liver *qi* and Blood stasis.

Treatment given:

Acupuncture: Moxibustion at Ren 8 *shen que*.

Needles: Du 20 *bai hui*, Ren 4 *guan yuan*, Ren 6 *qi hai*, M-CA 18 *zi gong*, TH 5 *wai guan*, LI 4 *he gu*, St 36 *zu san li*, Sp 6 *san yin jiao*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 6 *zhao hai*, Liv 3 *tai chong*.

Concentrated herbal powders: *Chai hu* 10, *xiang fu* 10, *zhi qiao* 10, *chi shao* 10, *chuan xiong* 10, *dang gui* 10, *yi mu cao* 10, *e zhu* 10, *wang bu liu xing* 10, *tao ren* 10, *hong hua* 10.

Variation: *Nu zhen zi* 10, *han lian cao* 10 and *he shou wu* 10 were added following her period. *Yue Yue Shu* sachets were added around ovulation for three days. *Bai shao* 10, *e jiao* 10 were added after ovulation.

Explanation: Liver *qi* stagnation and Blood stasis are the commonest patterns in women with infertility, so acupuncture points and patent herbs followed this treatment principle at first. *Chai hu*, *xiang fu* and *zhi qiao* move the Liver *qi*, *dang gui*, *chi shao* and *chuan xiong* move Blood stasis, which is a successful combination and capable of opening the fallopian blockage. *Er Zhi Wan* and *He Shou Wu* nourish Kidney *yin* in the first week to help the follicle to mature in the ovary, *Yue Yue Shu* sachets are used around ovulation to propel the egg's ejaculation and *e jiao* and *bai shao* are used in the last week of the cycle to nourish the embryo should she have conceived.

The husband took some patent herbs for improving his sperm condition: *Chai Hu Shu Gan Wan* was given to remove stress and to release adhesions in the testicles, which may have caused chronic inflammation there. *Wu Zi Yan Zong Wan* (*sang shen zi*, *tu si zi*, *nu zhen zi*, *gou ji zi* and *she chuang zi* – 'five seeds passing on the generations') was used to reinforce Kidney essence and to strengthen his sperm.

Outcome: After two years of treatment this patient became pregnant during her fourth IVF and gave birth by caesarean to a triplet of two girls and one boy, who all were in a healthy condition.

Analysis: This was a case of both fallopian tubes being blocked. Although the 'promoting menstrual cycle treatment' was given, it still was insufficient to open her blocked tubes in the short term. So IVF still looked like the best option. But after many failed attempts of IVF, including the hormonal treatment going with the IVF, she still showed symptoms, especially of an emotional nature, so I gave her acupuncture to help her to calm down and to manage, with the help of herbal powders, to regulate her unbalanced hormones. And it was also important for the husband to receive a course of patent herbs to strengthen the quality of his sperm. After the fourth IVF treatment she finally conceived due to being in a good general condition, which she gained with the help of TCM treatment.

Case 2: Successful pregnancy with IVF in a pre-menopausal woman

Mrs S.M., a 49-year-old teacher, became pregnant when she was 23 years old but she had an abortion at 6 weeks pregnancy. She

never managed to conceive after that and she started to worry about her reproductive capabilities when she was 40 years old. A gynaecological investigation showed both fallopian tubes to be blocked, plus she failed IVF twice. She visited me when she was 49 years old after having missed two months of her menstruation. Due to her amenorrhea the gynaecologists refused another IVF. She also manifested exhaustion, hot flushes, depression, tinnitus, insomnia and other symptoms.

Her tongue was red and she had a wiry-thin pulse.

TCM differentiation: Kidney *yin* deficiency, Liver *qi* stagnation and Spleen deficiency.

Treatment principle: To nourish Kidney *yin*, to move stagnant Liver *qi* and to reinforce Spleen *qi*.

Treatment given:

Acupuncture: Moxibustion at Ren 8 *shen que*

Needles: Du 20 *bai hui*, Du 24 *shen ting*, Ren 4 *guan yuan*, Ren 6 *qi hai*, St 29 *gui lai*, LI 4 *he gu*, Liv 3 *tai chong*, Ki 3 *tai xi*, Ki 10 *yin gu*, Ki 2 *ran gu*, St 36 *zu san li*, Sp 6 *san yin jiao*.

Patent herbal medicines: *Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan* / *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan*.

Explanation: She was given a typical supporting treatment, with the priority being the Kidney *yin* pattern. *Zhi Bai Di Huang Wan* reinforces Kidney *yin* and supports her oestrogen levels whilst *Jia Wei Xiao Yao Wan* moves Liver *qi* stagnation and excessive heat from Liver and Kidney *yin* deficiency. Regular acupuncture stimulated her depleted menstrual function.

Outcome: Once her periods returned she was given the 'promoting the menstrual cycle treatment' for half a year, after which she became pregnant following successful IVF. She conceived a healthy boy at the end of her term.

Analysis: This patient had been 49 years old by the time she tried to conceive. Her hormonal levels had been in the final stages which meant she had amenorrhea for two months. After she

was given acupuncture, which stimulated her reproductive organs, and herbal medicines, which had a stronger effect on reinforcing *qi* and *yin* in her Kidney and Spleen, her menstrual cycle returned. Her hormonal levels were probably still not high enough for a natural pregnancy, but she was accepted back by her gynaecologists due to the menses being regular again and IVF was given which proved successful in the end.

(All of the ladies above sent their appreciation cards with their babies' photos to me.)

CONCLUSION

To support the menstrual cycle by regular acupuncture and herbal medicine is an effective therapy to successfully promote pregnancy. Not only does it help women to conceive naturally, it also improves their ovarian functions, raises hormonal levels, corrects the state of the endometrium in the uterus and harmonises the whole reproductive system. It also raises the success rate of IVF.

In conditions where there is neither a clear diagnosis or the condition is caused by an ovarian problem it is useful to find the correct TCM treatment principle according to the different stages of the menstrual cycle. If the problem is lower down, like in blocked fallopian tubes or endometriosis, the 'promoting the menstrual cycle technique' can still be used, but different treatment principles usually also apply, like moving Blood stasis. By way of analogy: If you want to plant successfully, you have to thoroughly plough the soil before you put the seeds into it. So if you want to conceive easily, you have to improve the lining of the endometrium and create good circulation in the location. Acupuncture and herbal treatment are like ploughing which helps the uterus and the whole abdominal cavity to be in a good healthy condition. If the patient is in a good general and local condition, she will easily conceive, either with her husband in a natural way, or with the doctors' help through IVF.

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