The Treatment of Autism with Chinese Acupressure and Manual Lymphatic Massage

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According to the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, autism affects one in 110 kids. Officially Autism is called autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) and is categorized as a neurodevelopmental behavior disorder.

It is characterized by an early onset of a lack of attachment, the failure to cuddle as an infant and an almost complete disassociation with the environment. Children and adults display varying degrees of tactile defensive behaviors. When touched, such individuals display aggressive behaviors. Research has shown that when the tactile system is immature and not working properly, abnormal neural impulses are sent to the cortex of the brain which can interfere with other brain processes. This type of overstimulation in the brain can make it difficult for an individual to organize one’s behavior and may lead to a negative emotional response to touch sensations (Hutch-Rasmussen, Cindy, M.A.OTR/L: “Sensory Integration”. Therapy Network, 2003, Beaverton, Or.)

One may argue then that the origin of this disorder is located mainly in the brain. However, recent clinical studies have revealed a strong gastrointestinal connection as well. Mild to moderate degrees of inflammation were found in the upper and lower intestinal tract and decreased digestive enzyme activity as well (Horvath, Karoly: “Autism and Gastrointestinal Symptoms”. Current Gastrointestinal Reports, 2002, 4: 251-258). Some experts suggest that it is an autoimmune disorder, while others even propose that autism originates in a virus. However, most experts still agree that the disease resides mainly in the brain.

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) theory of the meridians, the body has six Yang meridians converging on the head. They provide communication and co-ordination of brain activities with other parts of the body. The six meridians are: Triple Burner, Gallbladder, Urinary Bladder, Large Intestine, Small Intestine, Stomach (see Figure 1). Any disorders along any of these meridians has the potential to affect the development of the brain. Conversely, any disorder of the brain, could affect these meridians and therefore the organs they feed with qi.
In addition, these meridians also connect and re-energise the three so-called *Burners* or energy centers located in the head, chest and belly that are also energy sources for the entire body. The *Upper Burner* (Jiao) refers to the upper part of the body and comprises of the heart, lung and pericardium organs.

The *Middle Burner* is related to the spleen, which has enormous immunological functions after birth, according to Western medicine. In TCM, however, the spleen functions to metabolize and transport the nutritious qi from food and drink to the rest of the body, after it has been broken down by the stomach. Accordingly, it assimilates usable nutrients from food and drink and builds up physical strength and vitality in the body. Entire schools of Chinese medicine were founded in past centuries on around the study and treatment of the spleen because of the premiss that all aspects of vitality in the body depended on the healthy assimilation and distribution of nutrients.

The *Lower Burner* refers to the lower section of the body and includes the Small and Large Intestines, the Kidneys and the Urinary Bladder.
In TCM, the practitioner is focused on how and where energy circulates in health. The pattern of energy flow is as follows: Energy flows out the top of the head and down the outside of the body along the *Yang* meridians to the feet and up again along the inside of the body along the *Yin* meridians to renew the three energy sources or *Triple Burners*. The meridians along the head create and support mental growth. The meridians along the chest are responsible for social and emotional growth and those in the belly area create and support physical growth. Growth depends on the free and abundant circulation of blood, which is moved by qi. Any blockage of qi will cause circulation to slow down and even stop. This in turn will impede the growth of mental health resulting in cognitive delay and also the delay of the development of social intercourse skills. But how can a blockage of qi in one single meridian or even a small part of the body have such comprehensive effects? The answer lies in the fact that all the 12 main meridians (see Figure 2) and their branches form an interconnected whole that transmit energy to every physiological system, organ, tissue and cell. One can liken the interconnectedness of all meridians to a spider’s web. Any tension or slack in one section is almost immediately felt in other sections.
In 2010, the acupuncture physician Dr. Yin Lo made a thermo-graphic or infrared study of the six yang meridians that converge on the head (Diagnosis and Treatment of Autism – Acupuncture Today, Nov. 2010, Vol 11, Issue 11). He wanted to find out which meridians were truly involved in autism. Results showed infrared images of energy concentrations in the form of heat along three *yang* meridians and hot spots that concentrated around the acupressure points on these meridians. The concentrations of heat, therefore indicated areas of inflammation in the tissues through which these meridians traversed. The meridians showing lines and points with most inflammation were the Urinary Bladder, Gall Bladder, Stomach. All of these meridians originate on the head and face.

From an anatomical viewpoint, Dr Yin Lo revealed that most hot pots and meridian lines of inflammation ran along the side of the head, front of the face and crossed the thyroid gland and armpits.

For more clarity, the armpits have lymph nodes which were shown to be swollen, probably as a result of an overactive immune system. The findings of these thermo-graphic studies.
though, had to be correlated to signs and symptoms according to TCM theory for a more complete picture. By themselves they were too non-specific.

The clear inflammation of the three yang meridians indicated a dysfunction in the corresponding physiological systems crossed and traversed by these meridians. These systems are the gastrointestinal system and immunological systems as affected by the Gall Bladder and Stomach meridians. The connection of the Gall Bladder and Stomach meridians to the gastrointestinal system is consistent with research findings mentioned earlier that see a correlation between autism and the gastrointestinal system. Then there is the neurological system influenced by the Urinary Bladder meridian. What is more, all the three yang meridians originate in the head, which means that the inflammation is also a reflection of dysfunction in the brain. This is consistent with an earlier mention on in the article, that the brain was overstimulated neurologically.

Furthermore, in terms of TCM psycho-emotional energy as explained by TCM Five-Element Theory, these Yang meridians also reflect the emotional and functional activity of Yang organs to which they are attached. There is a close interconnectedness between the physical manifestations of the meridians and the psycho-emotional aspects. Since these meridians all show heat, this indicates excess. So what are these psycho-emotional aspects of the three Yang meridians, according to TCM Five Element Theory?

Before going further it is necessary to briefly summarise the differences between Yin and Yang as it relates to the body. Yin refers to the anatomical aspects of the body, like the skeletal and muscular system, whereas Yang refers to the functional aspects or physiology of the anatomical systems. Also, from a bio-energetic level, Yin refers to what is static, stable, fixed and Yang refers to what is functional, changing, moving. The two aspects are complementary and not mutually exclusive.

The Urinary Bladder is in charge of the autonomic nervous system, which means it also controls the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Its element is Water. An imbalance in the Urinary Bladder caused by excess energy in Wood results in the person being inflexible, fearful, suspicious and opinionated. Conversely, a deficiency in energy will result in lethargy, feelings of isolation and cynicism.

The Gallbladder is attributed with courage and initiates change and movement according to its element Wood. An imbalance in the Gallbladder organ caused by weakness results in timidity, indecisiveness and easy discouragement by slight adversity. In excess, this energy leads to tyrannical, uncompromising and self-opinionated behavior. When the organ is in balance it enables change, moving, exciting and warming. These are typical yang characteristics overall.

The Stomach is in charge of the breakdown of food and water. Its element is Earth. An imbalance in the Stomach caused by excess energy will excite the mind and cause mental symptoms like mania, confusion, severe anxiety and hyperactivity. Also from a Wood energy perspective, the person becomes overprotective, meddlesome and worried. If the Earth energy is weak, the person becomes vacillating, hungry for attention and love. On a physical level the Stomach is also responsible for providing energy to all systems from the food and drink.
ordination with the Spleen energy it transports this energy to the lungs and combines with air energy or qi as well.

In keeping with TCM philosophy of treating the patient as a whole, the gastrointestinal, immunological and neurological system should all be treated together. For the massage practitioner one way of assessing a dysfunction in the meridians is by testing for sensitivity of the acupressure points and meridians themselves. High sensitivity usually indicates major imbalances. According to the thermo-graphic studies by Dr Yin Lo, the following meridian points showed hot spots.

On the Gall Bladder Meridian bilaterally (See Figure 3): GB 1, 2, 3 and GB 15. These run along the side of the head and above the ear. Then GB 22 close to the armpits also showed heat signs.
Flowing down from the head, the internal channels of the Gall Bladder pass through St-12 and Pc-1 then spiral around the Liver organ. From there, they circle the inside lining of the ribs (on the side of the body) then descend to the St-30 points.

The Internal and External Qi Flow of the Gall Bladder (GB) Channels

Figure 3
On the Urinary Bladder Channel bilaterally (See Figure 4), the hot spots ran along UB 37 to UB 40, which lie on the back of the legs and hamstrings.

Figure 4

The external flow of qi of the Urinary Bladder (UB) meridian
Lastly, on the Stomach channel (See Figure 5), heat ran from St 1 to St 4, which runs from below the eye down the front of the face. The stomach channel also runs through the Thyroid which showed inflammation all the way to St 12 on either side of the chest below the clavicle.
The strategy for the treatment of autism then is to treat all three meridians together. The massage therapist will use a combination of Tui-Na (Chinese medical massage) and manual lymphatic massage. Acupressure should be applied generally with pressure equaling the weight of a nickel. Again, the three meridians represent a treatment of the neurological, gastro-ntestinal and immunological systems. In addition for balance, some of the Yin organ and meridians that partner with the Yang organs according to the Five Element theory shall also be treated.

I propose that one starts with the Stomach meridian and its Five Element partner the Spleen, by doing a Chinese Tui-Na stomach massage. The goal is to balance and harmonise stomach qi. The stomach is ruled by the Earth element energy and it balances all Five Elemental Energies by extracting foods and fluids ingested through the mouth which are sent eventually as nourishing energy to all organs. The treatment involves a mixture of rotations, kneading and squeezing with both hands mixed with acupressure using thumbs and fingers.

From a Western viewpoint this facilitates better food breakdown and assimilation. In addition, certain acupressure points like St 36 (see Figure 7), the masterpoint of digestion, should be acupressed on each leg. If it’s tender, which is likely in excess conditions, the therapist should rotate his or her thumb counterclockwise and with the pressure of one nickel until the sensitivity will stop. This can take a minute or two and patience therefore, needs to be exercised.
In addition, the Lower He-Sea points of the Large and Small intestines St 37 and St 39 can be treated as part of treating vital organs of digestion. The Lower He-Sea points are indicated for problematic and excessive digestion issues like diarrhea, because they tap into a lot of qi-energy.

To finish the stomach treatment a connection can be made by holding two contact areas and points. The extra point Yin Tang (Popularly known as the Third Eye) between the eyebrows, which functions also to calm the mind and Conception Vessel 12 (CV 12) on the midsagittal line between the navel and xiphoid process. CV 12 (see Figure 6) is the master point of the stomach. Contact can be static for 15 - 20 seconds followed by counterclockwise rotation of the Yin Tang point.
Bi-polar contact on Yin Tang and CV 12 for balance

After treating the stomach and its corresponding meridian, the Kidney meridian can be addressed for more sedation and grounding. In TCM, the excess energy of the organs and meridians along the head illustrated by the hot lines and hot spots can be likened to a fire going out of control. The nature of heat energy is to rise and so it tends to rise to the head and stay there. Also the brain is controlled by the Heart organ which from a bio-energetic viewpoint belongs to the element Fire. So by using the Kidney organ and meridian points (Ki) belonging to the water element we “douse” that fire in a manner of speaking. Two good points to treat with acupressure are Kidney 1 and 3 on the foot. After holding each point for a minute or so, the therapist can rotate each thumb counterclockwise for a minute or so. Pressure is light.
Pressure applied simultaneously to both Ki 1 points for sedation

So far we have not started locally on the inflamed points on the head, face and thorax. The idea is to first work distally to these areas to pull the excess energy away from the brain. This resulting rounding and sedating.

The last step is to do acupressure on the head itself by focusing on these three meridians in sequence. The objective is to channel the excess energy in the meridians of the head downwards. Also, when a child is upset, qi energy builds up in the head. According to studies done by the Center for Disease Control, very often autistic patients overreact emotionally to sensory stimuli or become frustrated by not being able to communicate in an intelligible manner or not at all. First one should do a “Crown-Pull” which pulls away all negative energy down from the head. The therapist places four fingers on the forehead and pulls along the sides of the head towards the table. In so doing qi energy is unblocked and drawn along the main channels
Crown-pulling along the meridians

Then, the massage therapist focuses on Governor Vessel (GV) first since it rules the Yang qi in all Yang meridians and organs in the body. It is closely linked to the brain, spinal cord and kidney organ respectively. Since it communicates with the brain, it performs a similar function to the pituitary and adrenal axis link. The practitioner should start acupressure from the hairline on top of the forehead and work backwards, holding each point from GV 24 to GV 20 for about 15-20 seconds each. This should be repeated ten times. Special attention should be given to GV 20. This point is always used for all kinds of mental disorders and pain. Some of the more common disorders treated are: mania, schizophrenia, anger alternating with joy, shock, apoplexy, seizures of all kinds, chronic convulsions in children, cerebrovascular disorders. It is also used for all kinds of headaches and pain and inflammation in the head. The therapist should linger for about 30 seconds each time on this point, using a combination of static light pressure and counterclockwise rotation for grounding.
Acupressure on GV 20 for communication with the brain.

Next, parallel to the Governor Vessel the Urinary Bladder meridian (UB) should be acupressed starting from UB 2 on the medial extremity of the eyebrow all the way back to UB 10 in the depression under the occiput, and in the lateral aspect of the upper trapezius.
Head turned sideways for access to UB 10 with index finger.

Finally on the head, the Gallbladder (GB) meridian points from GB 1 in the outer canthus to GB 15 above the ear should be acupressed.

Then lymphatic massage strokes should be applied to the area of GB 22 under the armpit to relieve a burdened immune system. To enhance the immune system, the therapist should return to St. 36, the masterpoint of the digestive system and middle burner. Treatment strategy is one of sedation, grounding first and then tonifying and fortifying the system. Again, if there is sensitivity, the therapist should rotate with his or her thumb counterclockwise for sedation and grounding. This relieves the sensitivity and then follow up with clockwise rotation of both points for strengthening.
Lymphatic strokes flushing out towards the GB 22 area near the lymph nodes.
In summary, the overall effect of the acupressure and massage treatment is harmony and balance overall. The effect is one of centering and grounding the patient in a holistic manner. The body-mind and spirit connection, integral of Holistic medicine, should be re-established and strengthened, so that the patient can be present in the moment with all of his or her senses. Western research has established how complex the disease is through its involvement of many physiological systems. Therefore, in keeping with TCM treatment philosophy, balance and harmony is achieved by treating the patient as a whole, which is why the therapist should treat the neurological, gastrointestinal and immune systems together.

References