

Research Progress on Epilepsy Treatment with Traditional Chinese Medicine

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Abstract: *Epilepsy is a chronic brain disorder characterized by recurrent seizures, which can occur suddenly without warning, causing loss of consciousness, foaming at the mouth, and upward rolling of the eyes. Each seizure typically lasts about 3 minutes. Epilepsy can occur at any age and is marked by its transient and recurrent nature, making it a relatively common neurological disorder in clinical practice. Despite the fact that research into the pathogenesis of epilepsy is not yet thorough, Western medical treatment methods are still predominantly used in clinical settings. However, the treatment cycle with Western medicine is relatively long and the safety factor is not high. Therefore, the treatment approach is increasingly leaning towards traditional Chinese medicine. In recent years, with the continuous deepening of research on traditional Chinese medicine, it has been found that traditional Chinese medicine also has certain advantages in the treatment of epilepsy, playing a significant role in reducing drug resistance to Western medicine, lowering side effects, improving the quality of life of patients, reducing the burden on patients, and enhancing clinical efficacy. This article will review the research progress in the treatment of epilepsy from aspects such as its etiology and pathogenesis, treatment principles and methods, and oral Chinese herbal medicines, providing a reference for better clinical treatment of epilepsy.*

Keywords: Epilepsy, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Etiology and Pathogenesis.

1. Introduction

Epilepsy is a chronic neurological disorder characterized by abnormal electrical discharges in the brain, leading to transient dysfunction of the brain. According to research data, the number of epilepsy patients in China accounts for about one-eighth of the global total [1], and the trend is still on the rise. Currently, the treatment of epilepsy mainly relies on Western medicine, which has significant side effects, such as causing miscarriage in pregnant women, fetal malformations, severe skin allergic reactions, and even mental and behavioral abnormalities [2]. Traditional Chinese medicine has a long history and a wealth of clinical experience in the prevention and treatment of epilepsy. It can provide comprehensive treatment and has relatively fewer side effects, yet achieves remarkable therapeutic effects, making it more suitable for clinical promotion and application.

2. Understanding Traditional Chinese Medicine Disease Terminology

In modern medicine, epilepsy is known as "epilepsy disease" in traditional Chinese medicine, also named "epilepsy syndrome" or "sheep epilepsy" [3]. Due to its diverse causes and clinical manifestations, ancient physicians never accurately named epilepsy. In Wu Shi Er Bing Fang (Prescriptions for Fifty-Two Diseases) and Qian Jin Yao Fang (Essential Prescriptions for Emergency), it was named "horse epilepsy", "ox epilepsy", "sheep epilepsy", "pig epilepsy", "chicken epilepsy", "snake epilepsy", etc., based on the abnormal postures and strange sounds during seizures. In Huangdi Neijing (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor), it was named "bone epilepsy disease", "pulse epilepsy disease" and "muscle epilepsy disease" according to the location of the disease at the top of the head. It was not until the Tang Dynasty that Sun Simiao first proposed the term "epilepsy" in Bei Ji Qian Jin Yao Fang and most physicians have since followed this name [4]. Through thousands of years of clinical

practice and exploration of epilepsy, ancient Chinese physicians had a profound understanding of it and provided TCM experience and wisdom for its treatment, which still plays a key guiding role for researchers in solving the same problems today.

3. Etiology and Pathogenesis in Traditional Chinese Medicine

epilepsy falls within the scope of "Xian Zheng", also known as "Xian Bing" or "Yang Jiao Feng". The common causes of Xian Bing can be categorized into congenital and acquired factors: Congenital endowment deficiency, combined with acquired influences such as emotional disorders, dietary irregularities, or traumatic injuries, leads to disharmony of visceral Qi movement and dysfunction. Pathogenic factors like wind, fire, phlegm, and blood stasis may obscure the clear orifices. When triggered by incentives, this disrupts visceral Qi balance, upsets yin-yang equilibrium, causes rebellious Qi flow, and of the original spirit, leading to epileptic seizures [5].

4. Syndrome Differentiation and Treatment in Traditional Chinese Medicine

4.1 Holistic Treatment in Traditional Chinese Medicine

TCM places great emphasis on the unity and integrity of the human body, as well as its relationship with the natural world. It views the human body as an organic whole composed of multiple organs and tissues, where each component is structurally inseparable, functionally interdependent, and pathologically interconnected. These parts are mutually supportive, and pathological changes in one area often reflect imbalances in the entire body—such as disruptions in the viscera, qi, blood, or yin-yang dynamics. In TCM practice, treatment is not limited to localized symptoms but rather considers the whole body by analyzing how local

manifestations relate to systemic conditions. Guided by the holistic principle, appropriate therapeutic methods and strategies are formulated. Although TCM does not explicitly define epilepsy or specify its treatment, the condition can be categorized within the scope of "Xianbing" (seizure disorders). Only by consistently adhering to the holistic concept can practitioners comprehensively assess a patient's condition, apply syndrome differentiation-based medication, and ultimately alleviate suffering. Furthermore, humans and nature form an inseparable unity. While actively understanding and transforming nature, humanity sustains normal life activities. Simultaneously, changes in natural conditions inevitably impact health. Therefore, in syndrome differentiation and disease diagnosis, it is essential to uphold the principle of the human-nature unity, adapting treatment to seasonal, geographical, and individual factors. By recognizing the close connection between external environments and the body's internal state, effective treatment can be achieved.

4.2 Treatment of Organs and Organs

The disease is rooted in the brain but closely associated with the heart, spleen, liver, and kidneys. Its nature is primarily characterized by deficiency in the root and excess in the manifestations. Deficiency of the spleen and kidneys constitutes the root weakness, while wind, phlegm, toxins, and blood stasis represent the pathogenic excess. Among these, phlegm plays a particularly prominent role in the disease's onset. As Zhu Danxi stated in *Danxi's Essential Methods*, "Epilepsy is invariably caused by the obstruction of phlegm-drool clogging and clouding the orifices."

4.2.1 Treating from the Heart

The pathogenesis of epilepsy is not only related to the brain but also closely associated with the functional state of the heart in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). As stated in *Treatise on the Three Categories of Pathogenic Factors (San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang Lun)* by Chen Wuzhe of the Song Dynasty: "Epilepsy arises from fright-induced disturbances, causing imbalance of visceral qi... leading to sudden convulsions. It may also originate from prenatal fright... disrupting visceral qi." This emphasizes that imbalances in visceral qi due to various causes result in mental disturbances and disease manifestation. Abnormal mental states are primarily attributed to the heart, underscoring the heart's pivotal role in epilepsy pathogenesis [6]. In TCM theory, the heart is regarded as "the monarch organ, from which mental faculties emanate." It governs blood circulation and houses the spirit. Blood serves as the material basis for mental activities: sufficient heart blood ensures normal circulatory function and nourishes the spirit, maintaining stable mental states. Conversely, deficiency of heart blood deprives the spirit of nourishment, leading to mental instability. Additionally, qi propels blood circulation. Deficiency of heart qi may result in blood stagnation, causing phlegm or blood stasis that obstructs the heart orifices, thereby triggering epileptic seizures. In summary, epilepsy may arise from deficiencies in heart qi, blood, yin, or yang, or from pathogenic factors such as phlegm, fluid retention, heat, or blood stasis. These imbalances lead to phlegm congelation, qi stagnation, and obstruction of the clear orifices. Consequently, therapeutic approaches focus on blood nourishment and

circulation enhancement, qi supplementation and regulation, as well as spirit-calming and seizure-control methods [7].

4.2.2 Treating from the liver

"Treating epilepsy from the liver perspective can reduce the likelihood of wind-stirring and phlegm-production by regulating qi movement, thereby decreasing seizure frequency." *Medical Records: Integrating Chinese and Western Medicine* also states: "Various conditions such as convulsive epilepsy, manic-depressive disorders... what Western medicine refers to as neurological diseases, all relate to the liver meridian" [8]. Clinician Wang Wei advocates liver-focused treatment for epilepsy, emphasizing that the liver stores blood, governs dispersion, manifests yin in substance but yang in function, and regulates systemic blood and qi circulation. Impaired liver dispersion may cause qi movement disorders, easily triggering wind-stirring and phlegm-production that manifest as unconsciousness and convulsions. Therapeutic strategies including nourishing liver blood, regulating liver qi, and clearing liver fire, implemented through careful syndrome differentiation, can achieve favorable outcomes [9].

4.2.3 Treating from the spleen

Treating epilepsy from the spleen perspective regulates systemic qi and blood to stabilize the patient's internal environment. This approach gained prominence during the Jin-Yuan dynasties. As stated in *Ling Shu-Dong Shu*: "Stomach qi ascends to the lungs... travels upward to the sensory orifices, follows the ocular system, and enters the brain network." The spleen and stomach are exteriorly-interiorly related and interconnected through meridians. As the postnatal foundation of the body, proper transportation and transformation functions of the spleen-stomach ensure sufficient qi and blood, nourishing all tissues and supporting cerebral marrow production. Conversely, impaired spleen function leads to inadequate generation of qi, blood, and body fluids, resulting in insufficient marrow-sea nourishment, brain deficiency, and disease onset. Spleen deficiency may also cause damp stagnation, phlegm-turbidity formation, "earth obstruction and wood stirring" (spleen-liver disharmony), liver wind agitation, and mental orifices obstruction [10], thus triggering epilepsy. Furthermore, Su Wen-Yin Yang Xiang Da Lun notes: "The spleen... governs thought in emotions." Spleen dysfunction may induce emotional instability and prolonged anxiety, which also contributes to epileptic episodes [11]. The spleen-stomach plays a pivotal role in epilepsy pathogenesis. As the postnatal foundation, they nurture innate constitution. Combining middle energizer-strengthening therapies to regulate qi and blood with phlegm-resolving and wind-extinguishing agents achieves both symptomatic and root-cause treatment [12].

4.2.4 Treating from the kidney

"Treating epilepsy from the perspective of kidney regulation is considered a root-level therapeutic approach, as it replenishes the primordial driving force to ensure a sustainable source of qi transformation. In traditional Chinese medicine, the kidneys are regarded as the 'congenital

foundation. ' If children suffer from inherent constitutional deficiencies, they are predisposed to developing epilepsy during postnatal development. Master of Traditional Chinese Medicine He Puren proposed that although the disease location of epilepsy lies in the brain, it is most closely associated with the kidneys and the Ren-Du meridians. The kidneys serve as the source of marrow production, and sufficient kidney yin and yang ensure adequate qi transformation [13]. Therefore, Shenshu acupoint is often incorporated in treatment protocols to tonify essence, nourish the kidneys, and consolidate the root cause, thereby enhancing therapeutic efficacy. Inspired by the theory that 'impairment of all zang-organs ultimately affects the kidneys,' Chen Hanjiang et al. argued that prolonged epilepsy progression tends to involve kidney damage. They identified kidney yang deficiency and refractory phlegm stagnation as the core pathogenesis. Insufficient kidney yang leads to weakened primordial driving force, impaired qi transformation, and persistent phlegm accumulation. Consequently, their clinical practice emphasizes the protection of true yang and cultivation of kidney essence to achieve the effect of 'mild fire generating qi' [14]. "

4.3 Dialectical Governance

Pattern identification and treatment is a relatively modern concept. Although early practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) employed dialectical thinking in their practice, the formal term had not yet been introduced. Pattern identification and treatment is one of the two defining characteristics of TCM, alongside the holistic concept. However, this process is often oversimplified. In reality, it should be divided into two distinct parts: pattern identification and treatment determination. The process of pattern identification involves the practitioner using their senses—eyes, fingers, ears—to gather information conveyed by the patient. This data is then input into the "modeling software" mentioned in the previous article, which refers to the commonly used pattern identification methods, to construct a model and discern the underlying condition. For example, if a patient presents with a yellow, greasy tongue coating, a soggy and choppy pulse, obesity, and a red tongue tip, the modeling process may reveal issues such as damp-heat, blood stasis, spleen deficiency, and heart fire excess. The practitioner then simulates a reverse deduction to identify the mechanisms that produced these patterns. Treatment determination involves analyzing the results of the modeling to assess the situation, formulate a corrective strategy, and implement it. For instance, in the case of damp-heat, blood stasis, spleen deficiency, and heart fire excess, the root cause might be abnormal opening and closing of the pores leading to fluid stagnation, insufficient liver qi causing sluggish blood flow and stasis, obstruction in the heart fire's pathway leading to heat accumulation, and excessive strain on the spleen resulting in deficiency. The treatment plan must then evaluate the primary contradiction, the balance between healthy qi and pathogenic factors, and the body's functional capacity. For patients with epilepsy, the first step is to accurately identify the pattern based on clinical manifestations during both seizure and interictal periods, combined with ancient TCM treatment experiences for epilepsy. Then, the corresponding treatment principle is established for proper intervention. For example: In cases of phlegm-fire harassing the spirit, the

treatment should clear liver fire and resolve phlegm to open the orifices. For wind-phlegm obstruction, the approach should focus on eliminating phlegm and extinguishing wind to stop seizures. In qi deficiency with blood stasis, the treatment should tonify qi, resolve stasis, and calm wind to control epilepsy [15]. If epilepsy recurs repeatedly and becomes chronic, with symptoms such as fatigue, pale complexion, emaciation, poor appetite, loose stools, a pale tongue with a white greasy coating, and a deep weak pulse, it is identified as heart-spleen deficiency. The treatment should prioritize tonifying the heart and spleen, supplemented by regulating qi and resolving phlegm. For liver-kidney yin deficiency, the focus should be on nourishing the liver and kidneys. Only through accurate pattern identification and grasping the essence of the disease can effective treatment be achieved [16].

5. Traditional Chinese Medicine Treatment

From ancient times to the present, most medical practitioners have believed that the occurrence of epilepsy is closely related to "phlegm". For instance, in "San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang Lun · Epilepsy Discussion", it is mentioned that "epilepsy is all caused by shock, which makes the vital energy of the internal organs unbalanced, leading to the accumulation of phlegm and the blockage of all meridians". Phlegm obscures the heart orifice and leads to epilepsy. Among the various factors causing epilepsy, the influence of phlegm is the most significant [17]. Excessive emotions can transform into internal heat, which condenses body fluids into phlegm; or improper diet can damage the spleen and stomach, leading to poor digestion and the accumulation of dampness and phlegm. These accumulated phlegms can either rise with the qi, be driven by internal heat, or be stirred by wind, obscuring the heart orifice and disturbing the mind, thereby causing epilepsy [18]. It is evident that the accumulation of phlegm in the body blocks the meridians and leads to epilepsy. Influenced by previous medical practitioners, many have not paid sufficient attention to "blood stasis causing epilepsy". In "Medical Heart Words · Epilepsy and Mania", it is pointed out that qi stagnation and blood stasis are one of the main causes of epilepsy. "Hundred Questions for Infants · Epilepsy" provides a theoretical basis for the treatment of epilepsy with the method of promoting blood circulation and removing blood stasis [19]. According to modern medical research, the phenomenon of intermingled phlegm and blood stasis is very common in clinical practice. During an epileptic seizure, the patient's qi and blood circulation become disordered, resulting in qi stagnation and blood stasis. Therefore, the method of promoting blood circulation and removing blood stasis plays a crucial role in the treatment of epilepsy [20]. Ancient medical practitioners believed that wind among the six external pathogenic factors could also cause epilepsy. Wind is a yang pathogen, and its nature is to rise upward. The location of epilepsy is in the head and brain, which are easily invaded by wind [21]. In "Taiping Shenghui Fang · Wind Stroke Discussion", it is stated that "wind entering the yang meridians causes mania, and entering the yin meridians causes epilepsy", and in "Puji Fang", it is said that "all diseases caused by wind are due to the weakness of the skin and hair, the deficiency of the defensive and nutritive qi, the disorder of the meridians and the blockage of the orifices, which is called wind epilepsy". Many medical practitioners

believe that the fundamental cause of the disease is the patient's physical weakness and the weakness of the internal organs. Li Chenxi et al. [22] hold that the fundamental pathogenesis of epilepsy is the weakness of the spleen and stomach, which can lead to epileptic seizures in the following ways: first, insufficient qi and blood cannot nourish the brain marrow, causing the brain to be undernourished; second, the weakness of the spleen and stomach leads to the poor circulation of qi and blood in the body, resulting in qi and blood stasis; third, the spleen and stomach are the largest hub of qi, blood, yin and yang in the body. When they fail to function properly, the ascending and descending of qi, blood, yin and yang become abnormal, and the brain marrow is deprived of the nourishment of clear yang and is obscured by turbid yin, leading to epilepsy; fourth, the weakness of the spleen and stomach leads to the failure to transform water and dampness, generating phlegm and dampness, which disturb the orifices and cause the loss of control of the original spirit, triggering epilepsy [23].

6. Summary and Prospect

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), epilepsy is referred to as xianzheng, a paroxysmal disorder characterized by abnormal mental states. Its pathogenesis primarily stems from emotional imbalances, excessive consumption of rich and greasy foods, and subsequent disruptions in visceral qi movement, leading to phlegm and blood stasis obstruction and internal stirring of wind-qi, which trigger epileptic seizures. TCM offers distinct advantages in treating epilepsy, particularly in reducing relapse rates after symptom control. However, the treatment process tends to be relatively prolonged. Currently, clinical research on TCM-based epilepsy treatment still faces limitations, including a relatively small sample size and the need for stronger evidence.

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