

Review of Chinese Medicine External Treatment for Cancer Pain

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Abstract: ***Objective:** to analyze the present situation of external treatment of cancer pain in order to provide effective reference for clinical workers to treat cancer pain. **Methods:** in the past 10 years published in the core journals of literature on Chinese medicine treatment of cancer pain with external treatment are summarized. **Results:** each doctor had different treatment methods for cancer pain, but it could be divided into the following 3 methods: acupuncture, moxibustion, acupoint application and so on. **Conclusion:** The core theory of many therapies is based on dialectics, and the principle of “no pain” is the principle of treatment, so as to achieve the best curative effect, which is worthy of clinical application and popularization.*

Keywords: Cancer pain, External treatment of Chinese medicine, Review.

1. Introduction

Cancer pain primarily refers to chronic pain caused by direct or indirect infiltration, metastasis, diffusion, and compression of tumor cells on relevant tissues or by anti-tumor treatment, and is a common symptom among cancer patients. The World Cancer Report [1] published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2014 predicted that from 2014 to 2034, the number of new cancer cases globally will increase to 22 million, with 3.06 million new cancer patients in China and 2.2 million deaths, making China the country with the highest number of new cancer patients. According to statistics from the CA Cancer J Clin journal in 2016, China had 4.29 million new cancer cases and 2.81 million deaths in 2015; approximately 35%-79% of cancer patients endure moderate to severe pain, which significantly affects their quality of life and psychological state (anxiety and depression) [2-3]. Modern research surveys [4] have found that 76.4% of cancer pain patients are dissatisfied with the analgesic effect. Therefore, it is particularly necessary to study and apply effective analgesic methods to alleviate patients' pain symptoms and improve their quality of life. Modern external treatment methods of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) have become a hotspot in the treatment of cancer pain. TCM plays an important therapeutic role in alleviating cancer pain, extending survival duration, and improving quality of life. Based on domestic publications in the past 10 years, this article summarizes the progress in the treatment of cancer pain using external TCM methods.

2. Treatment Principles

2.1 Dialectical Treatment

Modern medicine categorizes cancer pain into acute and chronic pain based on its onset characteristics. Acute pain is primarily caused by chemotherapy, radiotherapy, immunotherapy, infection, etc., and its clinical features include recent onset, transient history, clear occurrence time, and identifiable causes. Chronic pain, on the other hand, lasts for more than one month or longer and is mainly divided into neuropathic, neuropathic-like, metastatic bone, and visceral pain. According to its pathophysiological mechanisms, it is

primarily classified into nociceptive and neuropathic types. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) believes that the causes of cancer pain mainly involve qi stagnation, blood stasis, and phlegm turbidity. However, the overall pathogenesis can be summarized as “impediment” and “incompatibility”. Therefore, different practitioners, based on their respective etiologies, differentiate between the two pathogenesis mechanisms of “impediment” and “incompatibility” and adopt different treatment methods to achieve good therapeutic effects. Wang Wenping [5], citing the statement in the “Neijing” that “all pains, itch, and sores belong to the heart,” posits that cancer pain is related to the heart's governing of blood vessels and the nourishing of various organs by blood. If qi and blood circulation is obstructed, various symptoms will arise. Hence, she believes that the treatment of cancer pain should be centered on the “heart.” Based on syndrome differentiation, the main thread and entry point is centered on cancer pain, the heart (physiological and pathological), and the meridians and organs. The guiding principle is to “unblock the heart meridians, dredge the meridians, calm the mind, and regulate qi and blood.” By regulating heart function and dredging meridians, the state of qi and blood circulation obstruction can be improved. Drugs belonging to the heart meridian, such as toad venom, borneol, and hedyotis diffusa, can be used to achieve analgesic effects. Wu Mianhua [6] posits that the causes of cancer pain are fourfold: pathogenic factors from the six exogenous pathogens, internal injury from the seven emotions, dietary imbalance, and deficiency of vital qi. The pathogenesis involves internal accumulation of cancer toxins, phlegm-blood stasis, and meridian congestion. Among these, internal accumulation of cancer toxins is the fundamental pathogenesis, with phlegm turbidity and deficiency of vital qi being significant factors. The pathological nature is primarily deficiency in the root and excess in the branch, with excess in the branch being predominant. The main treatment approach is to detoxify and remove blood stasis, resolve phlegm, and dredge meridians, with cancer elimination and detoxification being the key. Resolving phlegm and removing blood stasis runs throughout the entire process, achieving good therapeutic effects. Cheng Yao [7] analyzed the formation of cancer pain as a result of the invasion of tissues by pathological products from four aspects: qi stagnation, blood stasis, phlegm-dampness, and

heat-toxicity. Based on the characteristics of medication, he categorized the pathogenesis into five types: qi stagnation, liver qi depression and blood stasis retention, meridian obstruction and phlegm accumulation, dampness and heat-toxicity retention, damage to the internal organs and qi and blood deficiency, and malnutrition of the body and mind. He believed that the etiology and pathogenesis of cancer pain in clinical practice are often complex and multifaceted. The key to treatment based on syndrome differentiation lies in recognizing the pathological nature and pathogenesis, and implementing comprehensive treatment. In summary, various medical experts believe that the etiology and pathogenesis of cancer pain are largely similar. Therefore, based on the etiology and pathogenesis, with “treatment based on syndrome differentiation” as the core, combined with the characteristics of pain, selecting appropriate traditional Chinese medicine according to the syndrome type, and using specific therapeutic methods such as regulating qi, promoting blood circulation, removing blood stasis, and detoxifying will surely achieve good therapeutic effects.

2.2 “Tong” and “Rong” Principles

Most practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) generally believe that the pathogenesis of cancer pain is primarily due to two fundamental mechanisms: “dishonor” and “blockage”. Wu Xiqing [8], based on the relationship between the seven emotions and the occurrence of tumors, clinical experience, the TCM meridian system, and the “three blockages” pathogenesis theory (the internal and external meridian systems consist of the water-grain meridian, the water-fluid meridian, and the external qi meridian, while the internal meridian system consists of the meridian system, blood vessel system, triple warmer system, and brain nervous system), classified cancer pain into three types: blockage, dishonor, and imbalance. Blockage refers to qi stagnation, blood stasis, and phlegm turbidity; dishonor refers to qi deficiency, blood deficiency, yin deficiency, and yang deficiency; imbalance refers to yin-yang imbalance, visceral imbalance, and qi and blood circulation imbalance. Based on these pathogenesis principles, three treatment principles are adopted: nourishing in case of dishonor, regulating in case of imbalance, and resolving in case of blockage. Zhou Daihan, a renowned TCM oncologist [9], classified cancer pain into two types: qi and blood deficiency, and qi stagnation and blood stasis. He believed that the basic pathogenesis of cancer pain is the internal depression of cancer toxins, the intertwining of phlegm and blood stasis, and meridian congestion. In clinical practice, for patients with qi and blood deficiency, the method of nourishing qi and blood and warming meridians to alleviate pain is adopted using Danggui Sini Decoction; for patients with qi stagnation and blood stasis, the method of promoting blood circulation and removing blood stasis using Gesha Zhuyu Decoction combined with Shixiao Powder achieves good therapeutic effects. In summary, most practitioners in clinical practice adopt the basic treatment methods of “unblocking” and “nourishing” based on the fundamental pathogenesis of blockage and dishonor, achieving significant therapeutic effects.

3. Treatment Method

3.1 Acupuncture Therapy

Mi Jianping [10] believes that the occurrence of tumors is related to cold pathogenic factors, and cancer pain is caused by yang deficiency, phlegm coagulation, and blood stasis. As stated in the “Su Wen·Ju Tong Lun Pian” (Chapter on Pain), “When cold qi invades the five organs, it obstructs the flow of qi and blood, leading to a sudden death due to pain without consciousness. However, if qi returns, the patient will recover.” Therefore, he treated 30 cases of gastric cancer pain mainly with fire needle therapy combined with the three-step analgesia method. Specifically, on the basis of the three-step analgesia method in the control group, ordinary acupuncture was administered at Zhongwan (CV 12), Tianshu (ST 25), and Zusanli (ST 36) using fire needles. In the treatment group, fire needles were administered at Weishu (BL 15), Ganshu (BL 14), and Dishu (BL 14). The results showed that the total effective rate in the treatment group was 90%, while the total effective rate in the control group was 70%. There was a significant difference in the efficacy between the two groups. Therefore, it is believed that fire needle therapy can improve qi and blood circulation, enhance vital qi, warm and open meridians, promote qi circulation, and alleviate pain. The mechanism lies in the statement in “Yi Xue Zheng Chuan” (The True Teachings of Medicine) that “those who are in pain are not in pain because of a blockage, but because of a lack of circulation. However, the methods to unblock vary. Regulating qi to promote blood circulation, regulating blood to harmonize qi, and unblocking are all effective.” He Liu [11] treated 13 cases of cancer pain using percutaneous electrical stimulation at acupoints Hegu (LI 4), Zusanli (ST 36), Neiguan (PC 6), and Sanyangluo (SP 9). He believed that cancer pain is mainly caused by meridian blockage and qi and blood stasis. The mechanism of acupuncture in treating diseases is to unblock meridians and harmonize qi and blood. The four acupoints of Zusanli, Sanyangluo, Neiguan, and Hegu have the effects of supporting vital qi, nourishing the body, activating meridians, and alleviating pain, achieving the goal of unblocking the meridians and harmonizing qi and blood to alleviate pain. Zhang Yan [12] treated 30 cases of cancer pain using Qin’s eight head acupuncture points. In the treatment group, acupuncture was administered at Baihui (GV 20), Yintang (EX-B 1), bilateral Fengchi (GB 20), bilateral Lügū (GB 24), and bilateral Tóuqín (GB 20) for 5 days. The results showed that the treatment group was significantly better than the control group. He believed that the treatment mechanism lies in Professor Qin Liangfu’s theories of “mainly treating miscellaneous diseases by targeting the governor vessel” and “mainly treating limb diseases by targeting the governor vessel”. He believed that acupuncture does not target the tumor itself (the cause) for treatment, but intervenes and alleviates the “symptom” of pain by bypassing the “root cause” of the tumor through certain mechanisms and pathways. That is, “the root is deficient and the symptom is excessive”. Treating the symptom should focus on “unblocking”. Yan Jingwei [13] employed the acupuncture method of regulating spirit, promoting blood circulation, and alleviating pain to treat cancer pain. Based on the principles stated in “Jingyue Quanshu” (“Complete Works of Jing Yue”) — “The qi and blood of ordinary people are like springs; when they are abundant, they flow smoothly; when they are scarce, they become stagnant. Therefore, as long as the qi and blood are not deficient, there is no stagnation; when they are deficient, stagnation inevitably occurs”—and the “Inner Canon” (“Neijing”)—“When the heart is calm, the pain is

mild”, he selected acupoints such as Shuigou (ST 35), bilateral Neiguan (PC 6), Dumen (ST 25), Yindu (ST 34), Xuehai (SP 10), and Zhaohai (SP 4) for acupuncture. He believed that the pathogenesis of cancer pain lies in both “blockage” and “lack of nourishment”, with “blockage” being the primary factor. “Blood stasis and blockage, along with disturbance of the mind and spirit,” constituted one of the important pathogenesis mechanisms. Based on this, he established the treatment principle of “promoting blood circulation to alleviate pain and regulating the mind to harmonize the spirit”, and created the “acupuncture method for regulating the mind and alleviating pain”, achieving good therapeutic effects. Chen Zhongjie [14] treated 33 cases of cancer pain using the pain-as-acupoint acupuncture method. In the acupuncture group, corresponding pain points were selected for acupuncture based on the disease differentiation. In the control group, the corresponding three-step analgesia method was administered. The results showed that the acupuncture group had significantly better outcomes than the control group. Chen Zhongjie attributed this to the pathological characteristics of cancer pain, which are related to the prevalence of pathogenic qi and the deficiency of vital qi. Specifically, when the vital qi is deficient internally and pathogenic qi is excessive externally, the accumulation of pathogenic qi in a certain area leads to blockage of meridians and results in pain. Therefore, acupuncture at local tender points can directly dredge the local meridian qi, achieving the therapeutic goal of “dredging leads to no pain”. Modern animal experiments on cancer pain [15] have shown that different frequencies of treatment can promote the release of different opioid substances in the body, resulting in different therapeutic effects. For example, low-frequency electroacupuncture stimulation promotes the release of β -endorphin and enkephalin at the brain level, thereby activating MOR and DOR to exert analgesic effects; high-frequency electroacupuncture stimulation promotes the release of dynorphin at the spinal cord level, thereby activating KOR to produce analgesic effects. In summary, the mechanisms of acupuncture treatment for cancer pain vary. As stated in “Su Wen·Ju Tong Lun” (“The Classic of Pain”), “When the meridians weep, there is blood deficiency; when there is blood deficiency, there is pain; when there is lack of nourishment, there is pain.” However, various medical practitioners establish different treatment methods and principles based on the basic pathogenesis of “blockage” and “lack of nourishment”. With disease differentiation as the core, different acupoints are selected according to different treatment methods such as warming meridians, promoting blood circulation, and alleviating pain, all achieving good therapeutic effects.

3.2 Acupoint Application Therapy

The degree application method is a series of external treatment methods primarily involving the application, iontophoresis, injection, drug application, and implantation of certain traditional Chinese medicines at corresponding acupoints to achieve the purpose of controlling cancer pain. Li Ying [16] used Toad and Wugong Gel Plaster for acupoint application to treat 50 cases of cancer pain. The control group was given three-step analgesia, while the treatment group was given Toad and Wugong Gel Plaster (composed of toad venom, monkshood root, *Paris polyphylla* var. *chinensis*,

zanthoxylum nitidum, *rhizoma typhonii*, *sparganium stoloniferum*, *asarum*, clove, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh, borneol, menthol, etc.) applied to the tumor’s back-shu acupoints. The results showed that the treatment group had significantly better pain relief than the control group. Li Ying believed that the etiology and pathogenesis of cancer pain mainly involved qi stagnation, blood stasis, heat-toxin, phlegm-dampness, etc., leading to meridian blockage. When the meridians are blocked, pain occurs. Therefore, the treatment principle of “promoting circulation to alleviate pain” should be adopted. She also analyzed that the drugs in Toad and Wugong Gel Plaster are mostly products that promote blood circulation to remove blood stasis, enhance qi circulation, and alleviate pain by dredging meridians. Wang Fang [17] used external application of kidney-tonifying and blood-stasis-resolving traditional Chinese medicines combined with pamidronate to improve bone metastatic cancer pain in 30 cases. The treatment group was given external application of kidney-tonifying and blood-stasis-resolving traditional Chinese medicines (*rhizoma typhonii*, *clematis chinensis* osbeck, scorpion, *hedyotis diffusa*, *rehmannia glutinosa*, *rhizoma drynariae*, cortex moutan, borneol) to the local painful area on the basis of pamidronate. The results showed that the treatment group was significantly better than the control group. Wang Fang believed that bone metastatic pain was mostly caused by long-term tumor growth, pathogenic factors damaging vital qi, qi and blood deficiency, and inability to nourish the internal organs and meridians, leading to pain due to qi and blood deficiency. Pharmacological studies have shown that the entire formula has the effects of tonifying kidneys, resolving blood stasis, and alleviating pain, which can significantly interfere with bone mineral content (BMC) and bone mineral density (BMD) values in mice. It can directly act on the nervous system, antagonize nociceptors, and thus alleviate pain. Meng Yun [18] used Baima Powder for external application to treat bone metastatic cancer pain in 30 cases. The treatment group was given Baima Powder (composed of *angelica dahurica*, processed strychnine, frankincense, myrrh, *clematis chinensis* osbeck, *rhizoma corydalis*, *paeonia lactiflora*, and *paeonia lactiflora*) applied to the local Ashi points on the basis of the control group’s three-step analgesia. The results showed that the treatment group was significantly better than the control group. Meng Yun believed that cancer toxicity, phlegm, and blood stasis were the basic pathological factors of bone cancer pain. The treatment method should be based on promoting blood circulation to remove blood stasis, softening hard masses and resolving nodules, extracting cancer and alleviating pain, using “promoting circulation” as the principle, just as “opening meridians and penetrating joints” in the “Medical Record of Integrating Chinese and Western Medicine”. Li Zan [19] believes that cancer pain is caused by qi stagnation and blood stasis, dryness of body fluid, meridian blockage, long-term deficiency of vital qi, and qi and blood deficiency. Insect-based medicines (such as Scorpion, Toad, *Eupolyphaga sinensis*, Dragon, *Rhizoma Pinelliae*, and *Strychnos nux vomica*) have the effects of dredging meridians, harmonizing qi and blood, balancing yin and yang, and relieving pain by activating meridians. These medicines directly act on body surface acupoints, allowing the drug to penetrate into the skin and connective tissue through the skin and fascia. In summary, acupoint application therapy for cancer pain is often based on the principle that “pain is

caused by blockage.” The principle of acupoint selection often involves the use of distant and proximal acupoints, back and front acupoints, exterior and interior acupoints, and left and right acupoints. However, most often, local Ashi points are used to activate meridians and relieve pain. The principle of drug selection is based on syndrome differentiation and treatment, distinguishing the cold, heat, deficiency, and excess of the disease, the cold, heat, warm, and cool properties of the drugs, as well as the four properties and five flavors of the drugs. Drugs such as those that promote blood circulation, remove blood stasis, and activate meridians are selected. The external treatment method of acupoint therapy for cancer pain embodies the holistic view and syndrome differentiation and treatment spirit of traditional Chinese medicine. It has precise and rapid efficacy, minimal side effects, convenient use, easy control, and significant therapeutic effects, making it worthy of application. As stated in “On the Origin and Development of Medicine,” “External treatment methods, using paste to block qi, allow the drug properties to enter the connective tissue through pores, penetrating meridians and collaterals between the skin and bones. They either lift or disperse the blockage, which is more effective than taking medication.”

4. Comprehensive Therapy

Comprehensive therapy refers to the combined treatment of cancer pain using two or more methods such as acupuncture, moxibustion, acupoint application, and acupoint catgut embedding. Hu Lingjing [20] treated 53 cases of cancer pain with a combination of analgesic and external application to the painful area, synchronized with microwave therapy, acupuncture, and electroacupuncture. The treatment group received additional comprehensive external treatment based on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) on top of the control group’s treatment. The results showed that the treatment group had a significantly higher efficacy rate than the control group. Hu Lingjing believes that cancer pain is often caused by qi stagnation, blood stasis, phlegm-dampness, heat-toxin, or cold evil obstructing meridians, leading to poor circulation of qi and blood, resulting in pain due to blockage. As stated in the “Inner Canon,” “When the bones wither, the flesh sinks, the chest is full of qi, breathing is difficult, and the internal pain radiates to the shoulders and neck.” Therefore, the analgesic tincture is composed of ingredients such as frankincense, atractylodes rhizome, peony root, swell-knot herb, and borneol, which promote meridian circulation, activate blood circulation, and remove blood stasis, adhering to the principle of “when it is unblocked, there is no pain.” Si Fuchun [21] analyzed the prescriptions for external TCM treatment of cancer pain and found that the top four categories were 164 types of blood-activating and analgesic drugs, 118 types of enlightenment drugs, 93 types of detoxifying, insecticidal, and antipruritic drugs, and 92 types of blood-activating and wound-healing drugs. The analysis of external medications mainly focused on promoting blood circulation and removing blood stasis, promoting qi circulation, warming meridians and dispelling cold, and clearing heat and detoxifying as common treatment methods, adhering to the principle of “when it is unblocked, there is no pain.” Wang Fen [22] treated 60 cases of cancer pain with yin syndrome using external TCM therapy, including external application, moxibustion, and Chinese herbal iontophoresis. The selected Chinese herbs were for warming meridians and

promoting circulation, detoxifying and resolving nodules (dry ginger, asarum, aconite, dried toad skin, scorpion with clove, Zhejiang fritillary, raw pinellia, etc.). The results showed that the treatment group had a better efficacy rate than the control group. According to the principle of “when it is unblocked, there is no pain; when there is pain, it is blocked,” conditions such as cold coagulation, qi stagnation, and blood stasis can all lead to local meridian blockage. When the local meridians are blocked and qi and blood are not nourishing, pain occurs. Therefore, for cancer pain that is unblocked, methods such as warming yang to dispel cold, detoxifying and resolving nodules, and promoting circulation and relieving pain should be adopted to warm and unblock the meridians. Yang qi can promote qi and blood circulation in the meridians, nourishing the local skin and meridians, thereby resolving local cold coagulation. Then, through phlegm-resolving, softening, and detoxifying drugs, local nodules can be softened and dispersed, and the toxic evil can be resolved, achieving the effect of pain relief. Shen Lixian [23] treated 40 cases of advanced liver cancer pain with analgesic powder external application, acupuncture, and compound Danshen injection point injection as adjuvant therapy. The control group was treated with morphine sustained-release tablets, while the combined group was additionally treated with analgesic powder external application to the painful area of the liver, acupuncture at the liver and heart acupoints, and compound Danshen injection point injection at the liver and heart acupoints, as well as Ququan. The theoretical basis for this treatment is “pain occurs when there is blockage, and no pain occurs when there is flow.” Through the principle of acupuncture and moxibustion at specific acupoints to unblock meridians and regulate qi and blood to alleviate pain, as stated in “Lingshu, Volume Five, Qi Circulation, Chapter Sixty-Seven,” “When qi circulates, the spirit circulates; when the spirit circulates, qi circulates. The spirit and qi follow each other. The acupuncturist’s skill lies in obtaining the spirit and extracting qi.” The combination of analgesic powder external application, acupuncture, and point injection achieves the effects of nourishing qi, activating blood circulation, unblocking meridians, and alleviating pain. In summary, currently, various medical practitioners adopt comprehensive treatments based on the pathogenesis of “pain occurs when there is blockage,” selecting different external applications of traditional Chinese medicine according to syndrome differentiation, and achieving good therapeutic effects with methods such as promoting blood circulation to remove blood stasis, promoting qi circulation to alleviate pain, resolving mass and removing blood stasis, and clearing heat and detoxifying.

5. Conclusion

In summary, external treatment with traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) acts internally through external application, avoiding the multi-step inactivation and certain toxic and side effects encountered with oral administration through the digestive tract. It has clear therapeutic effects and does not have the disadvantages of addiction, dependence, and withdrawal associated with Western medicine. Many medical experts believe that the pathogenesis of cancer pain generally falls into two categories: “pain due to blockage” and “pain due to malnutrition.” However, external treatment often focuses on the root deficiency and superficial excess. External

applications often use therapeutic methods such as promoting blood circulation to remove blood stasis, regulating qi to alleviate pain, and dredging meridians and resolving masses. For example, drugs penetrate through the skin and mucous membranes into the skin pores, activating meridians and directly reaching the affected area. They target pathogenic factors or expel them, or attack and disperse them, thereby alleviating pain. Acupuncture relieves and eliminates pain caused by cold evil, heat toxin, phlegm evil, and blood stasis blocking meridians and malnutrition of qi and blood through acupoint stimulation to dredge meridians, harmonize qi and blood, and balance yin and yang. The comprehensive external treatment methods of TCM combine the advantages of acupuncture, acupoints, and drugs. Overall, the treatment of cancer pain with external TCM should be based on the fundamental pathogenesis of "pain due to blockage" and "pain due to malnutrition," with syndrome differentiation as the core and the principle of "dredging leads to no pain." The treatment methods include promoting blood circulation to remove blood stasis, regulating qi to alleviate pain, resolving masses and removing blood stasis, clearing heat and detoxifying, and dredging meridians to alleviate pain, in order to achieve therapeutic effects.

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