

Exploration and Clinical Application of the Theory of Preventive Medicine

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Abstract: Preventive Medicine is the current mainstream approach in Traditional Chinese Medicine for health preservation. Integrating theoretical knowledge on preventive medicine acquired through study and contemporary developments, this research explores both ancient and modern theories and applications of preventive medicine, drawing from classical texts and expanded treatment and prevention protocols developed by contemporary scholars. **Method:** This paper collects, organizes, categorizes, and summarizes various domestic literature from ancient and modern times. **Conclusion:** The theory of treating disease before it manifests offers therapeutic approaches applicable across all clinical disciplines, demonstrating broad applicability and promising prospects. It holds unique value in the field of preventive healthcare.

Keywords: The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine, Preventive treatment of disease, Theoretical Study, Classical texts of traditional Chinese medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicinal Diet.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of “preventive healthcare” has entered the public consciousness and gained widespread recognition. This shift stems primarily from the nation's progress toward achieving its first centenary goal in 2020—the establishment of a moderately prosperous society in all respects. Concurrently, the government has prioritized and vigorously promoted the traditional Chinese medicine sector, focusing on safeguarding the physical well-being of its citizens. Building on this foundation, both the state and its citizens have increasingly elevated their expectations for individual health and quality of life. Consequently, there is greater attention to disease prevention than ever before. This is evident in annual community-wide health screenings, cervical cancer vaccination programs for young women, and shingles vaccination initiatives for middle-aged and elderly populations. Alongside this progress, certain drawbacks have emerged. Different demographics experience mild discomfort stemming from distinct lifestyles: working populations face significantly higher risks of cervical spondylosis and tendonitis, while affluent individuals face increased susceptibility to diabetes and hyperlipidemia. These individuals collectively fall into the category of sub-health. Currently, the rapid growth of this sub-health population outpaces the advancement of medical institutions, creating challenges in screening these individuals. The difficulty in identifying and defining sub-health conditions leads to numerous misdiagnoses and missed diagnoses. Additionally, determining appropriate medical interventions for sub-health populations remains problematic, as improper interventions can sometimes accelerate the progression to disease states [1]. China's current reality involves a large population with a notably aging demographic, placing significant strain on the healthcare system. If management of the sub-health population further deteriorates, it could significantly degrade the overall health level of the population [2]. The “Healthy China 2030” Planning Outline [3] emphasizes strengthening public health education, enhancing national health literacy, and promoting healthy lifestyles. The state encourages the development and implementation of Traditional Chinese

Medicine (TCM) preventive healthcare initiatives alongside screening and early detection of major diseases. It is evident that in the medical field, alongside modern high-tech medical technologies, scientifically grounded TCM theories remain indispensable. The integration and mutual reinforcement of both approaches represent the most effective choice for treatment and prevention. Therefore, implementing the promotion of healthy lifestyles must first involve inheriting and advancing the “preventive healthcare” philosophy, combining it with modern medicine to unleash greater potential. Today, numerous scholars are integrating classical theories with modern research, broadening the theoretical and practical applications of “preventive healthcare.” The following provides an overview of its theoretical foundations, classical texts research, clinical applications, and preventive healthcare practices.

2. Theoretical Research on Preventive Medicine

Regarding the concept of treating disease before it manifests, the most widely circulated statement originates from the Huangdi Neijing: “The supreme physician treats disease before it manifests; the average physician treats disease as it is about to manifest; the inferior physician treats disease after it has manifested.” The phrase “the supreme physician treats disease before it manifests” first appears in the Ling Shu: “The supreme physician treats disease before it manifests, not after it has manifested. This is what is meant.” Other chapters of the Huangdi Neijing also document “treating disease before it manifests.” For instance, the Suwen: On Regulating the Spirit According to the Four Seasons states: “The sage does not treat disease once it has manifested but treats it before it manifests; does not treat disorder once it has arisen but treats it before it arises.” This passage articulates the principle of prevention before disease occurs. The Suwen: Acupuncture for Heat Disorders records: “Though disease has not yet manifested, if a reddish hue appears, puncture it—this is called treating disease before it occurs.” This passage expresses the concept of preventing disease progression once it has begun. In layman's terms, “treating disease before it

occurs” means taking appropriate measures to prevent the onset and development of illness. In response to the modern trends of increasingly younger onset ages and a growing population of sub-health individuals, deep exploration and application of the “treating disease before it manifests” theory represent the most contextually appropriate therapeutic approach. This theory primarily comprises four components: preventing disease before it manifests, treating impending disease early, preventing progression once disease has manifested, and preventing recurrence after recovery. This framework aligns with the Huangdi Neijing’s classification of disease states, sub-health states, impending disease states, and post-disease states [4]. Traditional Chinese Medicine’s “treating disease before it manifests” encompasses the entire process: when disease is latent and unmanifested (hidden and not yet apparent), manifest but not yet formed (with mild symptoms), formed but not yet erupted (with obvious symptoms), erupted but not yet transmitted (with typical symptoms), transmitted but not yet transformed (with signs of deterioration), and transformed but not yet resolved (at the critical juncture of recovery or deterioration, life or death) [5]. In his theory of constitutional medicine, Wang Qi proposed a three-tiered prevention model. This framework emphasizes constitutional regulation within disease prevention, categorizing it into three levels: regulating the constitution to resist pathogens, regulating the constitution to prevent disease, and regulating the constitution to prevent progression. Researchers including Li Ganlu [6] utilized the Traditional Chinese Medicine Constitution Chart combined with meridian measurements to explore meridian characteristics across different constitutions. Building upon the theoretical foundation of “treating disease before it manifests,” they investigated how to establish constitution-specific “treating disease before it manifests” protocols. Therefore, it can be concluded that pre-disease encompasses health, sub-health, and disease progression prevention. Health represents the pre-disease state; sub-health signifies the pre-disease state; and disease progression prevention denotes the disease state. Together, these form the concept of pre-disease, which has become the subject of contemporary medical research.

3. Research on Classical Texts Concerning Preventive Medicine

The current understanding of the theory of treating disease before it manifests in classical texts is primarily concentrated in works such as the Huangdi Neijing, Nan Jing, and Jin Gui Yao Lue. Research on this topic has largely focused on exploratory discussions and summaries of clinical applications. First, the concept of treating disease before it manifests is evident in multiple passages of the Huangdi Neijing: (1) Feng Wenlin et al. [7] suggest that the “Yijing,” “Sunzi’s Art of War,” and Laozi significantly influenced the “treating disease before it manifests” philosophy in the Huangdi Neijing. For instance, the “Yijing • Pi Hexagram” states: “Nine Five: Cease the adversity; the great man finds good fortune. He who perishes, he who perishes, is bound to the mulberry tree.” This urges vigilance against potential dangers and preparation for prevention, aligning closely with the concept of treating disease before it manifests. The Art of War: Planning Attacks states: “Therefore, winning every battle is not the highest excellence; subduing the enemy without fighting is the highest excellence.” This means that

winning every battle is not the best approach; compelling the enemy to surrender without fighting is the supreme strategy. This military philosophy of victory without battle aligns perfectly with the concept of treating illness before it occurs. The Dao De Jing states: Only by being aware of illness can one avoid illness.” This refers to the virtuous who can correct their own mistakes, recognize their shortcomings, and rectify their flaws, thereby avoiding harm. This sentence also shares similarities with the concept of treating illness before it occurs. It can be surmised that the above three perspectives may all be connected to and have origins in the concept of treating illness before it occurs in the Huangdi Neijing. (2) Fan Ye et al. [8] interpret the Nan Jing • Chapter 77: “The classics state that the supreme physician treats disease before it manifests, while the average physician treats disease after it has manifested. What does this mean? Thus: Treating disease before it manifests means that upon observing liver disease, one recognizes that liver disease will transmit to the spleen. Therefore, one first fortifies the spleen qi to prevent it from receiving the liver’s pathogenic influence. This is called treating disease before it manifests. The mediocre physician, upon seeing liver disease, fails to understand transmission and focuses solely on treating the liver. This is called treating existing disease.” This employs the theory of the Five Elements’ mutual overpowering and oppression to explain methods for preventing disease progression. This concept, like the “Inner Canon’s” approach to treating disease before it manifests, focuses on disease prevention and controlling progression. Moreover, Zhang Zhongjing not only endorsed the concept of disease progression in the Nan Jing within the Golden Cabinet Essentials, but also elaborated extensively on preventing progression in the Treatise on Cold Damage. All these examples can be seen as the origins or developmental lineage of the concept of treating disease before it manifests in the Inner Canon.

4. Clinical Application of Preventive Medicine

4.1 Preventive Medicine in the Treatment of Pulmonary System Diseases

Respiratory diseases such as colds, coughs, and asthma are all seasonally associated conditions. Chronic airway inflammations like bronchial asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are classified in Traditional Chinese Medicine as asthma disorders and dyspnea syndromes, which can progress to severe conditions like pulmonary distension or pulmonary atrophy. Numerous clinical studies demonstrate that TCM holds distinct advantages in treating the middle-to-late stages of COPD. Common therapeutic approaches for COPD patients include: treating winter ailments in summer, warming yang, clearing heat and resolving phlegm, and promoting blood circulation to remove stasis. Treatment is tailored based on individual pattern differentiation. Winter Diseases Treated in Summer falls under the theory of treating disease before it manifests. It evolves from the concept of “preventing disease before it occurs,” derived from the Suwen’s “Six Sections and Zang-Xiang Theory” which states “late summer overcomes winter” in the cycle of seasonal dominance. By administering medicinal or non-medicinal therapies during summer when nature’s yang energy peaks, it fortifies qi, warms yang, dispels cold, and unblocks meridians. This achieves the goal of

preventing and treating diseases prone to occur in winter, such as the aforementioned COPD. In cases of lung distension, phlegm may cloud the orifices, and yang deficiency may lead to fluid retention, posing acute risks. Among wheezing conditions, life-threatening collapse may occur, and chronic cough, chronic dyspnea, and chronic consumption gradually progressing to pulmonary distension or pulmonary atrophy. These all represent changes arising from inadequate or misguided treatment after disease onset, or from excessive deficiency of vital energy where the body's defenses fail to overcome pathogens. This leads to a state of pathogenic excess with vital deficiency, or vital deficiency with lingering pathogens, causing the condition to shift toward critical severity or intractability [9]. Therefore, it is essential to understand the patterns of occurrence, progression, and prognosis of lung-related diseases, enabling early detection, early treatment, and early prevention of deterioration.

4.2 Preventive Medicine in the Application of Oncological Diseases

In traditional Chinese medicine, tumors are classified as “masses” or “nodules.” TCM theory holds that “where pathogenic factors gather, vital energy must be deficient.” The Essential Readings of Medical Orthodoxy states: “Accumulations form when vital energy is insufficient, allowing pathogenic factors to take hold.” This passage elucidates the pathogenesis of tumors, which predominantly arise from insufficient vital energy, dysfunction of internal organs, accumulation of phlegm, fluid retention, and blood stasis, coupled with invasion by external pathogenic factors. Based on the theory of TCM constitution, we explore the relationship between constitutional types and tumors. Identifying high-risk constitutional types for tumors, uncovering disease patterns through TCM constitutional characteristics, and implementing early intervention represent a practical approach of great significance to the TCM philosophy of “treating disease before it manifests” [10]. In tumor prevention and treatment, integrating the “preventing minor issues before they become major” concept of “treating disease before it occurs” enables targeted preventive measures for patients at risk of developing tumors. This involves early screening, early intervention, and timely adjustment of organ dysfunction. For patients already diagnosed with tumors, before disease metastasis occurs, regulating qi and blood flow based on the Five Elements' mutual restraint relationships and meridian transmission patterns can prevent disease progression and achieve favorable prognosis outcomes. Postoperative care for early-stage tumors can also apply the “treating disease before it occurs” principle—post-recovery management to prevent recurrence. Employing methods to resolve stasis and disperse nodules can effectively eliminate residual toxins.

4.3 Preventive Medicine in the Management of Hypertension

Traditional Chinese medicine views hypertension as arising from the interaction between pathogenic factors and the body's defensive energy. Pathological factors include dietary indiscretion and excessive consumption of rich, sweet foods; excessive alcohol consumption damaging the spleen and stomach, impairing its transporting and transforming

functions, leading to internal phlegm-dampness that disturbs the clear yang; Emotional imbalances can also lead to stagnant liver qi transforming into heat, causing liver yang to rise excessively. Additionally, aging may result in kidney deficiency, insufficient yin essence, and water failing to nourish wood, leading to yin deficiency and yang hyperactivity. Therefore, before hypertension develops, focusing on health preservation to strengthen vital energy prevents the formation of pathological foundations that trigger hypertension. As the saying goes, “When vital energy resides within, pathogenic factors cannot invade.” [11] To prevent hypertension from occurring, guided by the principle of “treating disease before it manifests,” adjustments can be made in the following areas. First, align with nature and cultivate the spirit. The Suwen: Great Treatise on Regulating the Spirit According to the Four Seasons states: “Nourish yang in spring and summer; nourish yin in autumn and winter, following their roots.” This teaches us to align daily routines with seasonal changes, synchronizing bodily functions with nature's rhythms to strengthen vital energy and ward off pathogenic influences. Second, regulate diet and prioritize health preservation. The Suwen: Treatise on the Methods of the Zang Organs in Relation to the Seasons states: “The five grains provide nourishment, the five fruits offer support, the five livestock add benefit, and the five vegetables fill the body.” This outlines dietary principles. Among the pathological factors of hypertension are irregular eating habits, excessive consumption of rich and sweet foods, and excessive alcohol intake. Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed on dietary health—low salt, low fat, less oil, and a light diet. Third, preventing recurrence after disease onset. This primarily involves regulating the balance of qi, blood, yin, and yang. While strengthening the body's defenses and expelling pathogens, it is also crucial to promote blood circulation and resolve stasis. This approach not only prevents the recurrence of hypertension but also helps prevent other related cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases.

5. The Application of Preventive Medicine Theory in Health Care

Today, both the theory of preventing disease before it occurs and Chinese medicinal cuisine are emerging trends, both aimed at implementing China's health service reforms. Traditional Chinese medicinal diets are primarily categorized into four types: qi-tonifying, blood-nourishing, yin-nourishing and kidney-tonifying, and kidney-warming and yang-assisting. Their primary purpose in “preventive healthcare” services is to prevent disease and safeguard individual health [12]. This aligns fundamentally with the goals of modern nutrition science, both aiming to provide nutritional support for patients' bodies and thereby lay a solid foundation for achieving the physical and mental well-being of the general public.

5.1 The Application of Traditional Chinese Medicinal Dietary Therapy in Pulmonary Disorders

Currently, there exists a certain amount of research on the application of medicinal diets for lung-related diseases. Wang Jingqi et al. [13] analyzed the patterns of medicinal ingredients used in therapeutic diets for pulmonary disorders and established a database. They concluded that conditions

such as common cold, cough, asthma, and pulmonary tuberculosis can be effectively treated with therapeutic diets. The primary medicinal ingredients employed in these treatments include tonics for deficiency, agents to resolve exterior pathogens, and substances to resolve phlegm, relieve cough, and alleviate asthma. Related studies indicate [14] that formulas such as Lily and Anemarrhena Decoction, Coix Seed and Poria Porridge, and Fritillary Bulb and Apricot Kernel Drink can effectively alleviate coughing. In recent years, the incidence of lung-related diseases has significantly increased, leading to greater emphasis on TCM prevention and treatment [15]. Compared to Western medicine, TCM emphasizes holistic approaches, strengthening the body's defenses while expelling pathogens, and stimulating the body's inherent vital energy. This approach demonstrates distinct advantages in treating lung-related diseases, yielding superior clinical efficacy and long-term outcomes [16].

5.2 The Application of Traditional Chinese Medicinal Dietary Therapy in Oncological Diseases

Traditional Chinese medicinal dietary interventions play a complementary role in modern cancer treatment and are increasingly recognized by clinical oncologists [17]. Lu Meiqin et al. [18] found that medicinal paste formulations effectively improved nutritional status in nasopharyngeal carcinoma patients following chemoradiotherapy while significantly reducing complication rates. Fu Rudan et al. [19] applied medicinal dietary interventions in the clinical management of cancer patients, observing significant improvements in sleep quality, nutritional status, complication rates, and emotional regulation compared to a control group. Lei Xudong et al. [20] employed a qi-tonifying and blood-nourishing medicinal dietary formula to intervene in patients with malignant tumors of the digestive system. They found this formula effectively corrected hypoproteinemia, increased body weight and body fat, and enhanced patients' disease resistance.

5.3 The Application of Traditional Chinese Medicinal Dietary Therapy in Hypertension

During clinical treatment, scholars such as Chen Jiyue developed TCM-based therapeutic diets for hypertension by observing natural rhythms to discern vital energy patterns and adapting to changes to identify pathogenic factors, thereby enhancing patients' physical constitution [21]. Ma Jing [22] found through clinical observation and research that medicinal porridge reduced patients' blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Scholars including Ma Lina [23] found that medicinal foods derived from dual-purpose herbs—kudzu root, cassia seeds, hawthorn, and peach kernels—along with related medicinal diets, could improve clinical efficacy in patients. The “medicinal foods share the same origin” theory is a hallmark of traditional Chinese medicine. Medicinal diets offer distinct advantages in health preservation, disease prevention and treatment, and longevity promotion [24], providing effective adjunctive therapy for hypertension and hyperlipidemia [25].

The principles underlying traditional Chinese medicinal diets and the theory of preventing disease before it occurs are fundamentally the same. Both embody the concept of

regulating health through strengthening the body's defenses, expelling pathogens, preventing disease progression, preemptively guarding against illness, and integrating prevention with treatment. Medical scholar Sun Simiao stated in his work *Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Pieces of Gold*: “A physician must first thoroughly understand the source of illness, identify its cause, and treat it with food. Only when dietary therapy proves ineffective should medication be prescribed.” This demonstrates the ancient recognition of dietary therapy's importance, and today, the nation is actively promoting traditional Chinese medicine policies.

6. Conclusion

Currently, research on preventive medicine in traditional Chinese medicine remains incomplete, with many original texts from classical literature yet to be thoroughly studied and clarified. However, there is broad consensus on the conceptual framework and practical application of preventive medicine, and significant progress has been made in its research and development. Numerous unstudied statements within classical texts require continued follow-up. While its application across clinical disciplines is highly comprehensive and widely applicable, with a substantial body of exploratory literature, animal experimentation remains insufficiently demonstrated. This presents a viable direction for future research, offering greater potential to identify and address issues arising in patient treatment and prevention.

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