

Exploration of Clinical Methods for Treating Heart Failure Based on “Heart-Kidney Synergistic Treatment”

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Abstract: Heart failure (HF) is the end stage of various cardiovascular diseases, with persistently high morbidity and mortality rates, posing a serious public health problem. Modern medical treatments can effectively improve HF symptoms and prognosis, but still have limitations. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has explored various treatment methods for HF in the long term, among which the theory of “treating both the heart and kidneys” is one of the core treatment methods, demonstrating unique advantages and significant clinical efficacy. This article reviews ancient TCM texts, clinical treatment methods, and commonly used prescriptions for treating HF using the theory of “treating both the heart and kidneys.” The article points out that the theory of “treating both the heart and kidneys” is rooted in the holistic view of “interrelation of the five internal organs” in TCM, believing that although the main location of HF is in the heart, its occurrence and development are closely related to kidney function. Deficiency of heart and kidney yang and imbalance of water and fire are the core pathogenesis of this disease, while blood stasis and fluid retention are key pathological products. This article aims to provide a reference for the clinical treatment of HF using the theory of “treating both the heart and kidneys.”

Keywords: Heart-Kidney Synergistic Treatment, Heart Failure, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Theoretical Discussion, Clinical Research.

1. Introduction

Heart failure (or simply heart failure) refers to a syndrome of circulatory disorders caused by impaired cardiac contraction and relaxation functions, resulting in insufficient venous return to the heart. The “China Cardiovascular Health and Disease Report 2022” indicates that there are as many as 330 million cardiovascular disease patients in my country, of which 8.9 million are heart failure patients, and the mortality rate of hospitalized patients is as high as 4.1% [1]. Heart failure is characterized by high incidence, poor prognosis, and high readmission rate [2].

Modern medicine’s treatment of heart failure has evolved from the initial hemodynamic model of “cardiac strengthening, diuresis, and vasodilation” to the “golden triangle” centered on neuroendocrine inhibitors, the “new quadruple therapy,” and even the current “new pentad” regimen [3]. While these approaches have significantly improved patient prognosis, challenges remain, including diuretic resistance, adverse drug reactions, and individual differences.

Traditional Chinese medicine, based on its holistic approach and syndrome differentiation, shows promising clinical application prospects in improving heart failure symptoms, enhancing patients’ quality of life, and reducing readmission rates.

Although traditional Chinese medicine does not have the name “heart failure”, according to clinical symptoms, it can be classified into categories such as “palpitations”, “wheezing syndrome”, “edema”, and “heart water” [4]. The pathological characteristics of this disease are mostly characterized by “deficiency of the root and deficiency of the target”. The root

deficiency is mainly characterized by qi deficiency, yang deficiency, and yin deficiency, while the target deficiency is mainly characterized by blood stasis, phlegm retention, and water retention [5]. In the differentiation of visceral syndrome, heart failure is mainly located in the heart, and its relationship with the kidneys is particularly close [6]. The “Ling Shu: Meridians” states: “The meridians of the kidneys and feet with little yin. their branches originate from the lungs and flow into the chest,” indicating that the meridians of the heart and kidneys are connected. Based on this foundation and combined with clinical experience, later medical practitioners gradually proposed the theory of “heart kidney interaction” and “water fire harmony”, and deeply recognized that “when the five organs are injured, poverty will inevitably affect the kidneys” (Jingyue Quanshu). Over time, heart failure will inevitably affect the kidneys, forming a complex situation of heart kidney disease. Therefore, “treating heart and kidney together” has become an important treatment principle in traditional Chinese medicine for heart failure.

This article aims to explore and learn about the research progress of the “heart kidney simultaneous treatment” theory in the treatment of heart failure from the perspectives of theoretical origins, understanding of pathogenesis, clinical diagnosis and treatment, and application of traditional Chinese medicine by reviewing relevant literature.

2. The Ancient Origins and Theoretical Basis of the Theory of “simultaneous Treatment of Heart and Kidney”

The formation of the theory of “treating the heart and kidneys together” originated from classic Chinese medical texts and is based on the close physiological connection and pathological influence between the heart and kidneys.

2.1 Meridians are Connected and Belong to Shaoyin

The “Ling Shu: Meridian Chapter” clearly states: “The meridians of the kidneys and feet with little yin. the straight ones run through the liver and diaphragm from the kidneys and enter the lungs. the branches of the meridians flow out of the lungs and enter the chest.” The heart and kidneys have a direct connection in the circulation of meridians. The heart and kidneys belong to the Shaoyin meridian, with one being the Shaoyin of the hands and the other being the Shaoyin of the feet. The two meridians are interconnected, forming the basis for the physiological and pathological transmission between the heart and kidneys.

2.2 Water and Fire are Harmonious, Yin and Yang are Mutually Rooted

The core of the theory of “treating the heart and kidneys together” is “the combination of water and fire, and the mutual roots of yin and yang”. The Great Treatise on the Tianyuan Annals in Su Wen states: “The ruler’s fire is based on clarity, and the corresponding fire is based on position.” The heart fire is the ruler’s fire, belonging to the yang and located in the upper burner; Kidney fire is a phase fire that can reside in the kidney water, belongs to yin, and is located in the lower burner. Under physiological conditions, when the heart fire descends and warms the kidney water, the kidney water is not cold; When the kidney and water nourish the heart yin, the heart fire does not become excessive. This state of “water fire harmony” and “heart kidney interaction” maintains the dynamic balance of yin and yang in the human body. As stated in the “Ge Zhi Yu Lun”: “When a person is born, the heart is above fire and the kidneys are below water. Water can rise and fire can fall, one rise and one fall, and there is no end to it.” However, if the heart and kidneys do not communicate, water and fire will not be in harmony. As stated in the “Shenzhai Yishu”: “If the heart and kidneys do not communicate, it depends entirely on the rise and fall. If the upper and lower parts do not communicate, it is not (pi), and if the heart and kidneys do not communicate, it is a sign of deficiency. In heart failure, it is common to see heart yang deficiency and decline, unable to lower and warm kidney yang, resulting in cold and congealed kidney water; Or kidney yang deficiency, inability to nourish heart yin, resulting in excessive heart fire, ultimately leading to yin-yang imbalance, with water vapor entering the heart and lungs, causing symptoms such as wheezing and edema.

2.3 Mutual Use of Spirit and Mind, Peaceful Position of Ruler and Minister

Among the five viscera, the heart stores the spirit, serving as the monarch; the kidneys store essence, govern will, and serve as the forceful organ. The “Leijing” states, “The spirit relies on essence and qi; essence generates qi, and qi generates spirit.” When kidney essence is abundant, it ascends to the heart, transforming into heart blood and nourishing the heart spirit; a clear heart spirit can regulate the kidney’s storage function, preventing the reckless leakage of essence. The heart and kidneys mutually support each other, jointly maintaining normal mental activity.

Common mental symptoms in heart failure patients, such as

palpitations, insomnia, and anxiety, are caused by disharmony between the heart and kidneys and a loss of mental control.

2.4 Qi and Blood Share the Same Origin, Essence and Blood Transform Each Other

The “Zhang Family Medical Communication” states: “If the essence does not leak, it will return to the essence of the liver and transform into clear blood.” The heart stores the spirit, controls the blood vessels, the kidneys store essence, controls bone marrow, the liver stores blood, and controls drainage. Kidney essence is the fundamental material basis for the transformation of blood, and the operation of blood depends on the promotion of heart qi and the warmth of kidney yang. Therefore, the heart and kidney organs jointly participate in the biochemical and operational processes of qi and blood in the human body. When heart failure occurs, there is a deficiency of heart qi and weak blood circulation, which can lead to blood stasis; Kidney essence deficiency and lack of blood circulation can lead to deficiency of heart and blood, and the two affect each other, forming a vicious cycle.

In summary, there are extensive and profound connections between the heart and kidney in terms of meridians, yin and yang, spirit, qi and blood, etc., which provides a solid theoretical basis for the treatment of heart failure with “heart kidney co treatment”. Heart failure, although it begins in the heart, ultimately affects both the kidneys. In treatment, it is necessary to balance the heart and kidneys in order to identify the underlying cause of the disease.

3. The Interpretation and Development of the Pathogenesis of Heart Failure with the Same Heart and Kidney Disease by Modern Medical Practitioners

In modern clinical practice, many doctors have inherited the theory of ancient books and combined it with modern pathophysiological understanding of heart failure to provide a more in-depth explanation and exploration of the pathogenesis of “heart kidney disease”.

Professor Hu Zhixi believes that the basic pathogenesis of chronic heart failure is the “deficiency of qi stagnation” proposed by Academician Wang Yongyan, which refers to the stagnation of blood, qi, and body fluids due to the deficiency of vital energy. The deficiency of qi is the root cause of the disease; ‘Stagnation’ is the hallmark of illness. The two are mutually causal, forming a vicious cycle. Special emphasis is placed on the key link between heart and kidney failure in the occurrence and development of heart failure. Heart kidney imbalance, water fire imbalance, especially in the middle and late stages of heart failure, often presents obvious symptoms of kidney function damage. Therefore, in treatment, attention should be paid to dredging the heart and kidneys [7]. Professor Guo Weiqin believes that the main sites of chronic heart failure in the middle and late stages are the heart and kidneys, and its pathogenesis is mainly characterized by “heart kidney yang deficiency, blood stasis, and water stasis”. She pointed out that treatment should be based on warming and tonifying the heart and kidneys, promoting blood circulation and diuresis, seeking yang in yin, and calming the

mind. The heart failure mixture she created is a manifestation of this idea [8]. Professor Zhang Yan innovatively proposed the hypothesis of the “heart kidney intestinal axis” based on the theory of “the kidney stores essence and controls water”. It is believed that the occurrence and development of heart failure are mainly related to the heart and kidneys, but the intestine, as a “vulnerable tissue”, cannot be ignored in the metabolic disorders of heart failure fluids. When heart failure occurs, the cardiac output decreases, leading to insufficient intestinal blood flow perfusion, impaired intestinal barrier function, increased permeability, endotoxin translocation, and systemic inflammatory response, thereby worsening heart failure. This is consistent with the theory that ‘the kidney is the key to the stomach’, and that kidney qi deficiency is detrimental to the metabolism of the middle burner fluid. Therefore, she proposed the concept of “treating heart, kidney, and intestine together”, which further expanded the treatment from heart and kidney to intestine, and opened up new methods for preventing and treating heart failure [9]. Director Ma Lianzhen, based on the physiological characteristics of the heart and kidneys, believes that congestive heart failure is a pathological change centered around the deficiency of yin in the heart and kidneys. It often manifests as a syndrome of “deficiency of yang in the heart and kidneys, cessation of blood stasis and water retention” in the development and evolution of the disease. In the treatment, the principle of “restoring yang qi in the heart and kidneys, rescuing the reverse and consolidating the excess” is followed, and different compatibility methods are adopted according to the syndrome, achieving the goal of treating the heart and kidneys together, the heart, liver, and kidneys together, the heart, spleen, and kidneys together, and the heart, lungs, and kidneys together [10]. Master Lei Zhongyi proposed the idea of “the heart is rooted in the kidneys, and treating the heart from the kidneys”. Believing that heart disease originates from the kidneys, kidney deficiency is the initiating factor of heart failure, and heart kidney qi deficiency is the fundamental cause of the disease. In the diagnosis and treatment of diseases such as chest obstruction and heart failure, he focuses on treating from the perspective of the kidneys, emphasizing the importance of nourishing the kidneys. At the same time, he organically combined pathological factors such as phlegm, blood stasis, toxin, and wind, and believed that the pathogenesis of heart failure is Yang deficiency, blood stasis, and water stasis. Based on this, it can be depressed and transform heat into toxin, forming a more complex “phlegm, blood stasis, toxin, and wind” syndrome. In terms of treatment, he proposed a combination of multiple methods such as treating deficiency and blood stasis simultaneously, cultivating the essence and regulating the palpitations, treating the standard essence simultaneously, nourishing qi and warming yang, and promoting blood circulation and water flow [11].

These modern medical views have greatly enriched and developed the connotation of the “heart and kidney treatment” theory, expanding it from the traditional “heart and kidney interaction” to multiple levels such as “deficiency and qi stagnation,” “heart-kidney-intestinal axis,” and “phlegm, blood stasis, toxins, and wind,” making it more relevant to the complex and diverse clinical reality of modern heart failure.

4. Clinical Differentiation and Medication Rules Guided by the “Heart and Kidney Treatment” Principle

Under the general principle of “treating heart and kidney simultaneously”, clinical doctors have summarized rich experience in syndrome differentiation and medication based on different stages and types of heart failure.

4.1 Staged Diagnosis and Treatment Based on Syndrome Differentiation

Many medical professionals advocate for differential diagnosis and treatment based on different stages of heart failure, reflecting the academic concept of “dynamic examination”.

Early stage (Stage A/B, with severe deficiency and mild stagnation, or both): This stage is primarily characterized by deficiency of heart qi, which may be accompanied by blood stasis. Treatment focuses on tonifying heart qi, supplemented by promoting blood circulation. Professor Hu Zhixi, referring to the American Heart Association (ACC/AHA) heart failure staging, believes that stages A and B are characterized by severe deficiency and mild stagnation, with heart qi deficiency being the primary diagnostic symptom [7]. Commonly used formulas include Baoyuan Decoction and Shengmai Powder, with appropriate additions of blood-activating herbs such as Danshen and Chuanxiong.

Mid-stage (Stage C, with both deficiency and stagnation): In this stage, the Yang Qi of the heart and kidneys is damaged, and blood stasis and water retention are obvious. The pathogenesis is mostly due to deficiency of Yang Qi in the heart and kidneys, and blood stasis and water retention. Treatment should focus on warming and tonifying the heart and kidneys, and promoting blood circulation and diuresis. This is the most common syndrome in clinical practice. Professor Guo Weiqin is good at using modified versions of the Heart Failure Compound (Codonopsis pilosula, Astragalus membranaceus, Morus alba root bark, Lepidium apetalum, Lycopodium lucidum, Polyporus umbellatus, Poria cocos, etc.) to treat patients in this stage [8]. Zhenwu Decoction combined with Guizhi Gancao Decoction is a classic formula for this stage, which can significantly improve the patient’s TCM syndrome [12].

Late stage (D stage, with mild deficiency and severe excess or both yin and yang deficiency): During this stage, the heart and kidney yang qi weaken, water and drink overflow, phlegm and blood stasis accumulate, and even critical symptoms of both yin and yang deficiency appear. Treatment requires replenishing vital energy, restoring yang and rescuing reverse, promoting blood circulation and diuresis, as well as nourishing yin. Commonly used formulas include Aconitum, Ginseng, Astragalus membranaceus, etc., such as Shenfu Injection, Zhenwu Decoction and Shenfu Decoction. Professor Zhan Wentao referred to this period as the phenomenon of gloom, and commonly used modified Shengmai Zhenwu Tang or Jisheng Shenqi Tang to restore yang and relieve reverse, warm yang and promote diuresis [13].

4.2 Main Syndrome Types and Prescriptions/Medications

The method of “treating the heart and kidney together” is mainly divided into three major syndromes: “heart kidney yang deficiency”, “qi deficiency, blood stasis, and water retention”, and “heart kidney non interaction”, each with different clinical manifestations and treatments.

Heart and kidney yang deficiency syndrome is a common symptom in the treatment of heart failure. Symptoms often include palpitations, shortness of breath, aversion to cold, cold limbs, lower back and knee weakness, oliguria, edema, pale and swollen tongue with a white and slippery coating, and a deep, thready, and weak pulse. Treatment should focus on warming and tonifying the heart and kidneys, promoting qi circulation, and resolving blood stasis. The treatment often uses Zhenwu Decoction (from “Shanghan Lun”): In this formula, *Aconitum carmichaelii* warms the kidneys and assists yang, transforming qi and promoting water metabolism; *Poria cocos*, *Atractylodes macrocephala*, and fresh ginger strengthen the spleen and promote diuresis; *Paeonia lactiflora* astringes yin and harmonizes the blood, preventing the drying and pungent effects of *Aconitum carmichaelii*. The entire formula works synergistically to warm yang and promote diuresis, making it a renowned ancient formula for treating heart and kidney yang deficiency with water retention [14]. Studies by Liu Haiming et al. have confirmed that its combination with Guizhi Gancao Decoction shows significant efficacy in cardiac function and TCM syndrome scoring [15]. In clinical practice, Shenfu Injection, derived from Shenfu Decoction, can also be used, greatly replenishing vital energy and restoring yang to consolidate the body’s foundation. Studies show that its overall effective rate in treating chronic pulmonary heart disease complicated with heart failure (heart and kidney yang deficiency syndrome) reaches 89.74%, significantly improving cardiopulmonary function [16].

Qi deficiency, blood stasis, and water retention syndrome refers to a condition characterized by prominent blood stasis symptoms on the basis of heart and kidney yang deficiency. Symptoms include palpitations, chest tightness, shortness of breath, fatigue, purplish lips, palpable mass under the ribs (hepatosplenomegaly), and lower limb edema. Treatment should focus on tonifying qi and warming yang, promoting blood circulation and diuresis. In clinical treatment, Shencao Tongmai Granules can be used: composed of ginseng, astragalus, *Salvia miltiorrhiza*, and lepidium seed, which tonifies the heart and kidneys, promotes blood circulation, and promotes diuresis. Clinical studies show that it can increase left ventricular ejection fraction, reduce LVEDD and LVESD, and improve the E/A ratio [17]. A formula for tonifying the heart and kidneys and promoting blood circulation and diuresis includes 30g each of *Poria cocos*, *Polyporus umbellatus*, and *Cinnamomum cassia*; 20g each of dried ginger and white peony root; and 18g each of *Ligusticum chuanxiong*, *Aconitum carmichaelii* (decocted first), *Atractylodes macrocephala*, and licorice root. Clinical observations show that the overall effective rate of the integrated traditional Chinese and Western medicine treatment group is higher than that of the conventional treatment group [18].

Heart kidney non overlapping syndrome is more common in

patients with heart failure and insomnia in clinical practice. Symptoms include palpitations, restlessness, restlessness, soreness and weakness in the waist and knees, dizziness and tinnitus, red tongue with little coating, and fine pulse count. The treatment principle is to communicate with the heart and kidneys, clear fire and calm the mind. Professor Wang Chaoliang is good at using cinnamon twig, licorice, dragon bone, Oyster soup (Treatise on Febrile Diseases) and Jiaotai Pill (Han’s Medicine) to treat heart failure and insomnia, and using cinnamon twig and licorice to warm and smooth the heart yang; Dragon bones and oyster towns provide peace of mind; Huanglian and cinnamon are used in combination with cold and heat to promote heart and kidney function [19].

4.3 Commonly Used Drug Pairs and Antler Drugs

Medical professionals have summarized many effective drug combinations and corner medicine combinations in long-term clinical practice, which can be used to treat corresponding syndromes and achieve the effect of enhancing therapeutic efficacy. Qi tonifying and Yang warming can be achieved by using ginseng/red ginseng Huangqi and Fuzi Guizhi. Professor Yan Shiyun often uses ginseng *Astragalus membranaceus* to nourish the heart qi, and *Epimedium Deer Antlers Psoralea* to nourish the kidney yang [20]. The combination of *Danshen Yimucao*, *Zelan Alisma*, and *Chuanxiong Plantago* can be used to promote blood circulation and promote water circulation. Both blood and water can be treated together. Huanglian Cinnamon (Jiaotai Pill) can be used for the heart and kidney of traffic. Huanglian clears the heart fire, while Cinnamon ignites the fire and restores the essence, jointly playing the role of traffic heart and kidney. The use of dragon bones oysters and mother of pearl purple shell teeth for calming the nerves in important towns can be used for patients with heart failure accompanied by palpitations and severe insomnia, which can calm the heart and calm the nerves.

5. Summary and Prospect

This article systematically explores the research progress of the theory of “heart kidney co treatment” in treating heart failure from ancient books, clinical treatment, and other perspectives. This theory has a profound origin in ancient Chinese medical texts and a complete theoretical system, which has been continuously enriched and developed in the clinical practice and treatment of modern doctors. Both clinical and basic research have confirmed that syndrome differentiation and medication intervention based on the principle of “treating heart and kidney simultaneously” can effectively improve the clinical symptoms and heart function of heart failure patients, and enhance their quality of life. However, it cannot be ignored that there are still some shortcomings in current research and directions worth exploring in the future. Most clinical studies have small sample sizes, short observation periods, and lack large-scale, multi center, long-term follow-up randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to provide higher-level evidence-based medicine. In the future, it is necessary to design more rigorous clinical trials and establish a standardized efficacy evaluation system. How to combine the individualized advantages of traditional Chinese medicine syndrome differentiation with the standardized diagnosis and treatment of modern medicine,

and achieve precise treatment of “disease syndrome combination”, is an important issue for the future. Explore the establishment of a syndrome diagnosis and efficacy prediction model based on artificial intelligence, and on the basis of clarifying the efficacy and mechanism, carry out secondary development of classic prescriptions and empirical formulas with proven efficacy, further develop safe, effective, and quality controllable new Chinese medicine drugs, and benefit a wider range of patients.

In short, “treating heart and kidney together” as an important theory and treatment method of traditional Chinese medicine for heart failure has unique advantages and broad clinical application prospects. Adhering to the combination of inheritance and innovation, the combination of foundation and clinical practice, and the combination of traditional Chinese medicine and modern medicine will undoubtedly promote the continuous deepening of research in this field, and contribute more traditional Chinese medicine wisdom and solutions to overcome the major disease of heart failure.

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