

Exploring the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Anorectal Diseases and the Diagnostic Thinking Based on the Huangdi Neijing

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Abstract: *Based on the discussions in the “Huangdi Neijing” regarding the etiology, pathogenesis, and syndrome differentiation of anorectal diseases, this paper analyzes the thinking behind the etiology, pathogenesis, and syndrome differentiation of anorectal diseases, as well as related traditional Chinese medicine treatments. The occurrence of anorectal diseases in the “Huangdi Neijing” is closely related to irregular diet, emotional disorders, invasion of external pathogens, stagnation of qi and blood in the meridians, and dysfunction of the zang-fu organs. The content of syndrome differentiation for anorectal diseases in the “Huangdi Neijing” mainly includes aspects such as zang-fu organs and meridians, yin-yang and qi-blood, and disease prognosis. Although the “Huangdi Neijing” does not explicitly detail specific treatments for anorectal diseases, the related concepts and ideas it contains for prevention and treatment provide important guidance for later treatment of anorectal diseases. This paper organizes the relevant literature on anorectal diseases in the “Huangdi Neijing” in order to offer a relatively comprehensive new perspective for clinical diagnosis and treatment of anorectal diseases.*

Keywords: Huangdi Neijing, Anorectal, Etiology, Pathogenesis, Dialectical thinking, Treatment.

1. Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine Anorectal Disease is an important branch of Traditional Chinese Surgery. It is a clinical discipline based on the theoretical system of Traditional Chinese Medicine and combines diagnostic and therapeutic technologies and methods from modern medicine to study the occurrence, development, prevention, and treatment of anorectal diseases [1]. The medical classic “Huangdi Neijing” provides detailed and rich records on the causes and mechanisms of anorectal diseases as well as on differential diagnosis and treatment. Many of its theories still guide the clinical diagnosis and treatment practices of TCM anorectal medicine today and are of great significance in deepening the understanding of anorectal diseases. “Huangdi Neijing” is divided into two parts, “Lingshu” and “Suwen,” which elaborate extensively on aspects such as “Yin-Yang and Five Elements,” “Zang-Xiang” (organ functions), “meridians,” “etiology,” “pathogenesis,” and “Qi circulation.” These aspects lay the foundation for differential diagnosis and treatment in anorectal diseases. As common and frequently occurring diseases, anorectal conditions are recorded in multiple sections of “Huangdi Neijing.” In “Suwen,” there are over 80 records related to the large and small intestines and 4 records on hemorrhoids, while in “Lingshu,” there are 149 records related to the large and small intestines and 3 records on hemorrhoids [2]. “Huangdi Neijing” discusses anorectal diseases from multiple perspectives, including etiology, anatomy, physiology, and pathology [3], and has also formed a unique differentiation approach for anorectal diseases. Based on the Five Movements and Six Qis, the transmission and transformation of organs, meridian differentiation, internal and external factors, Qi and blood, and Yin and Yang, it takes a multi-angle and comprehensive differentiation approach, establishing the foundation for the diagnosis and treatment of anorectal diseases [4].

2. Analysis of the Causes and Pathogenesis of Anorectal Diseases

2.1 Irregular Eating Habits

Indulging in rich, fatty, spicy, raw, cold, or greasy foods and alcohol easily leads to the internal generation of damp-heat. Over time, this can result in functional deficiencies of the internal organs, gastrointestinal disorders, imbalances of qi and blood, and obstruction of the meridians, causing stagnant blood and turbid qi to block the anus, and the muscles and vessels to become relaxed, resulting in hemorrhoids [5, 6]. As mentioned in ‘Suwen · Discussion on the Circulation of Vital Energy’: ‘Because of overeating, the muscles and vessels become relaxed, and the intestines swell into hemorrhoids, ‘ it indicates that overeating can impair the spleen and stomach’s digestive functions, leading to relaxation of the muscles and vessels, generation of internal damp-heat, convoluted and stagnant blood, which accumulates in the intestinal walls, thereby causing hemorrhoids and other anorectal diseases.

2.2 Emotional Disorders

The seven emotions refer to joy, anger, worry, contemplation, sorrow, fear, and fright, which are the human body’s true responses to external matters. In anorectal diseases, injuries caused by prolonged worry, overthinking, depression, or anger, affecting the internal organs, are more commonly seen. For example, anger harms the liver; when liver qi is stagnant, it can transform into fire. Worry and overthinking harm the spleen; when the spleen loses its proper function, internal damp-heat develops, and toxic fire can descend to the large intestine, leading to anorectal diseases. Internal injuries from emotions can cause disruptions in the body’s qi mechanism, thereby affecting the functions of the internal organs. Long-term emotional discomfort and liver qi stagnation can impact the spleen and stomach’s transportation and

transformation, as well as the large intestine's conduction function, causing poor circulation of qi and blood, stagnation in the intestines, and thereby triggering anorectal diseases. For instance, in the "Suwen: On Pain" it is stated, 'Anger causes qi to rise; if severe, it can lead to vomiting blood and diarrhea,' indicating that excessive emotional reactions can affect the functions of the internal organs, disrupt qi flow, and consequently lead to diarrhea and other anorectal diseases.

2.3 External Evil Invasion

The six evil influence energies mainly include wind, cold, heat, dampness, dryness, and fire (heat). External sensation is also one of the causative factors of anorectal diseases, such as the "Ulcer Collection of Ulcer Experience: Distinguishing Intestinal Wind and Organ Toxicity": "Wind, cold, heat, dampness and heat external evils can all be bleeding" [7]. It shows that no matter which external evil is infected, there is a possibility of bleeding in the anorectal area. The "Suwen Yin and Yang Yingxiang Da Lun" mentions that "wind is moving, heat is swollen, dryness is dry, cold is floating, and dampness is wet", pointing out that different external evils invade the human body, which will lead to different diseases, among which excessive dampness can affect intestinal function, cause diarrhea and other anorectal diseases, excessive heat will lead to redness and swelling, and may also cause carbuncles and other diseases in the anorectal area. As mentioned in the "Suwen Shengqi Tongtian Theory", "the trapped vein is a fistula, lingering in the flesh, and the qi is thin, transmitted as fear, and frightened", the cold qi is deeply trapped in the veins, lingering between the muscles and pores, and the qi and blood are blocked and accumulated, and over time it becomes a fistula. It is mentioned that "cold qi guest between the intestines and stomach, under the membrane, the blood cannot be dispersed, and the small collaterals are urgent and cause pain", cold evil invades the stomach and intestines, which can cause blood and qi coagulation, tense veins, and cause pain and other anorectal symptoms.

2.4 Meridian Qi and Blood Blockage

The twelve meridians are the main stems of the human meridian system, also known as the "twelve primary meridians." As recorded in the 'Lingshu': "Meridians are what enable life and death decisions, address all diseases, and regulate deficiency and excess; they must not be obstructed," meaning that the smoothness of the meridians plays an important role in the circulation of qi and blood and in disease prevention in the human body. If the circulation of meridian qi and blood in the human body is not smooth, it can affect the normal functions of the internal organs as well as the conduction and excretion functions of the intestines. If qi and blood stagnate in the anorectal area, it can easily lead to hemorrhoids, swelling, pain, and other anorectal diseases.

2.5 Dysfunction of the Internal Organs

Huang Yuanyu, a famous physician of the Qing Dynasty, believed that the root cause of hemorrhoids is 'damage to the Zhongyang,' and proposed the treatment concept of caring for the spleen and stomach. For example, if the spleen and stomach are weak, it can lead to abnormal transportation and transformation, preventing the essence of food and drink from

being properly distributed and waste from being properly excreted, which easily accumulates in the intestines, producing pathological products such as damp-heat, thereby leading to anorectal diseases. Similarly, dysfunction of the large intestine's conduction can directly cause abnormal defecation, triggering anorectal diseases.

3. Traditional Chinese Medicine Differential Diagnosis Approach

The differential diagnosis and treatment of anorectal diseases in the "Huangdi Neijing" mainly include the following aspects:

3.1 Differentiation of Viscus and Meridians

The transmission and transformation of viscus reflect the mutual influence among the organs. Diseases of the lung can transmit to the large intestine, causing pathological changes in the large intestine. Meridian Qi and blood: According to the discussion of the Hand Yangming Large Intestine Meridian in 'Ling Shu: Jing Mai,' when the Qi and blood of the Large Intestine Meridian are excessive or deficient, corresponding symptoms appear along its course. For example, when the Qi of the Large Intestine Meridian is excessive, it causes 'heat and swelling along the pulse,' and when Qi is deficient, it causes 'cold shivering that does not return.' This provides a basis for differentiating anal and intestinal diseases from the perspective of the meridians.

3.2 Differentiating Yin-Yang and Qi-Blood

Yin-Yang imbalance: When Yang is excessive, there is heat. Heat evil accumulates in the large intestine, which can cause symptoms such as heat pain in the intestines and dry stools. When Yin is excessive, there is cold. Cold evil stagnates in the large intestine, which can lead to abdominal pain, diarrhea, and other symptoms. The 'Huangdi Neijing' considers the balance of Yin and Yang as the foundation of human health, as in 'When Yin is balanced and Yang is concealed, the spirit is healthy.' Imbalance of Yin and Yang leads to illness. When Yin and Yang lose relative balance and become excessive or deficient, various diseases may occur, including anorectal diseases.

Abnormal Qi and Blood: When the movement of Qi and Blood is not smooth and stagnates in the local area of the anus and intestines, it can manifest as hemorrhoids and other conditions. As stated in 'Su Wen · Zhi Zhen Yao Da Lun,' 'Unblock its Qi and Blood to make it reach and regulate,' which provides a perspective for treating anorectal diseases from the viewpoint of Qi and Blood.

3.3 Assessing Disease Prognosis

The 'Su Wen · Da Qi Lun' mentions, 'If the kidney pulse is small, faint, and deep, it indicates intestinal bleeding; if accompanied by fever, the patient will die' and 'if the pulse is small, deep, and rough, it signifies intestinal bleeding; if the body is hot, death occurs, and if the heat lasts seven days, death follows.' Judging the prognosis of anorectal diseases through pulse patterns and accompanying symptoms provides a reference for clinical diagnosis and treatment.

4. Traditional Chinese Medicine Guidance for Treatment

Although the Huangdi Neijing does not explicitly detail specific treatments for anorectal diseases, it contains many related concepts and ideas for prevention and treatment, which have important guiding significance for the treatment of anorectal diseases in later generations. The main aspects include the following:

4.1 Preventing Disease Before It Occurs

The concept of “treating disease before it occurs, preventing transformation if disease exists, and preventing recurrence after recovery” in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is applied in TCM prevention and treatment. Its effectiveness in health preservation, enhancing physical fitness, and treating diseases has been confirmed through thousands of years of practice [8, 9]. Therefore, health preservation can be used to prevent the occurrence of anorectal diseases. For example, in “Su Wen · Discussion on the Health of Ancient Times,” it is mentioned to “follow the principles of yin and yang, harmonize with numerical methods, regulate diet, maintain regular routines, and avoid excessive labor,” emphasizing maintaining good living habits and dietary regularity and avoiding overexertion to sustain the body’s vital energy, thereby preventing anorectal diseases.

4.2 Preventing Disease Progression Once

‘Preventing disease progression once ill’ is one of the core concepts of Traditional Chinese Medicine. It emphasizes early intervention and preventive measures. Once a disease occurs, early diagnosis and early treatment should be carried out to prevent further deterioration of the condition. For example, in “Nan Jing” (The Classic of Difficult Issues), Chapter 77, it says, ‘What is called treating before illness is, upon seeing a disease of the liver, knowing that it should be transmitted to the spleen; therefore, first strengthen the spleen’s qi, so that it does not receive the pathogenic influence of the liver, hence it is called treating before illness.’ This reflects the idea in ‘preventing disease progression once ill’ of stopping the disease from spreading. By regulating the related organs in advance and enhancing their ability to resist pathogens, the transmission of the disease can be prevented. The theories in the *Huangdi Neijing* (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon) concerning the spread through organs and meridians can be used to guide the prevention and treatment of anorectal diseases. For instance, the large intestine and the lung are externally and internally related; if the large intestine has a disease, regulating the lung can prevent the progression of the illness.

4.3 Holistic Concept

“Man and heaven and earth” is an important idea put forward in the “Huangdi Neijing”, and the “Lingshu Suilu Theory” mentions: “Man and heaven and earth are compared, and the sun and moon correspond to each other”, the human body is a part of nature, developing according to the laws of nature, “born of the qi of heaven and earth, and formed by the law of the four seasons”. Man and nature are a whole, and many factors in nature affect the life activities of the human body

and affect the occurrence and development of diseases [10]. For example, “Suwen Four Qi and Divine Theory” says: “Therefore, the yin and yang four seasons are the beginning and end of all things, the foundation of life and death, and if it is reversed, disasters will arise, and diseases will not arise, which is called attaining the way.” From the perspective that the human body is an organic whole, it is believed that the occurrence of anorectal diseases is closely related to the qi and blood of the organs, meridians, etc. In the “Suwen Vitality Tongtian Theory”, “Therefore, the tendons and veins are dissolved, and the dysentery is hemorrhoids”, pointing out that improper diet can lead to abnormal spleen and stomach transport, which in turn affects the flow of intestinal qi and blood, and causes anorectal diseases such as hemorrhoids.

4.3 Regulate and Smooth Qi and Blood

Qi and blood are the foundation of the human body. The normal circulation of qi and blood maintains the proper functioning of the body’s five viscera and six bowels, as well as the limbs and bones. Poor circulation of qi and blood is one of the important factors leading to anorectal diseases. The Huangdi Neijing proposes that methods such as acupuncture and moxibustion can be used to unblocking meridians and harmonizing qi and blood, in order to improve the stagnation of qi and blood in the anorectal area and achieve therapeutic effects. For example, the Ling Shu: Meridians records multiple meridians related to the anorectal region and their qi and blood circulation, providing a theoretical basis for acupuncture treatment of anorectal diseases.

4.4 Adapting to the Times

The ‘Su Wen · Discussion on Preserving Life in Its Entirety’ mentions: ‘Humans are born from the qi of heaven and earth, and exist according to the laws of the four seasons.’ This means that human life exists in accordance with the changing rhythms of qi in heaven, earth, and the four seasons. Based on this, the five viscera and six bowels of the human body exhibit different characteristics with the changing qi of the seasons, and treatment methods and health preservation principles should be adjusted according to the climatic features of different seasons. For example, the ‘Su Wen · Major Discussion on Adjusting the Spirit According to the Four Qi’ emphasizes following the changes of the four seasons. In spring, one should ‘sleep at night and rise early, walk broadly in the yard, loosen the hair and relax the body to nourish the will, ‘ while in summer, one should ‘sleep at night and rise early, avoid weariness in the sun, and keep the will free from anger, ‘ etc. By adjusting lifestyle and emotions, the body can adapt to the natural environment, preventing the occurrence and aggravation of anorectal diseases in different seasons.

4.5 Auxiliary External Treatments

The “Huangdi Neijing” mentions the saying ‘rub and bathe,’ providing a theoretical basis for external treatments such as Chinese herbal fumigation, washing, and sitz baths. Fumigation and washing therapy utilizes the combined effects of warmth and medicinal herbs to stimulate the nervous system and capillaries, promote lymphatic and blood circulation, thereby alleviating swelling and pain. It can also boost metabolism, improve the nutritional status of local

tissues, and facilitate wound healing. In other words, it helps to unblock the meridians, dispel wind and dampness, activate blood circulation and remove blood stasis, reduce swelling and relieve pain, thereby easing the symptoms of anorectal diseases.

5. Conclusion

This article, by reviewing the records and descriptions in the “Huangdi Neijing” related to the causes of anorectal diseases, syndrome differentiation approaches, and treatment guidance, summarizes that the occurrence of anorectal diseases is closely related to deficiencies in the internal organs and disharmony of yin and yang, involving factors such as irregular diet, emotional disturbance, invasion of external pathogenic factors, poor circulation of meridian qi and blood, and dysfunction of the internal organs. Based on the syndrome differentiation approach centered on the internal organs and meridians, yin and yang, qi and blood, and disease prognosis, combined with numerous treatment concepts and ideas in the “Huangdi Neijing,” some guiding practices for the clinical treatment of anorectal diseases today are derived, which are of great significance for future clinical treatment of such diseases. The era of traditional Chinese medical classics differs in many aspects from modern society, including lifestyle, environmental factors, and bowel habits, all of which may have a profound impact on the etiology and manifestations of anorectal diseases. By delving into classical works such as the “Huangdi Neijing,” new ideas and perspectives for modern research on anorectal issues can be provided from another angle. The understanding of anorectal diseases in traditional Chinese medical classics emphasizes a comprehensive approach combining overall syndrome differentiation and local treatment, which can complement modern medicine’s focus on anal and intestinal anatomy, overall physiological functions, environmental factors, and changes in people’s living habits. Continuously exploring, summarizing, and studying ancient Chinese medical literature on anorectal diseases not only helps learners and practitioners improve their ability to read and understand ancient Chinese medical texts but also deepens the understanding of the etiology, pathogenesis, and syndrome differentiation thoughts of anorectal diseases. It also contributes to improving the clinical diagnosis and treatment level of anorectal diseases and has important guiding significance for the development of modern traditional Chinese medicine in the field of proctology. Future medical practitioners need to continuously explore and summarize classical medical works such as the “Huangdi Neijing,” to continuously delve into and learn from them, thereby improving clinical efficacy.

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