

Holistic fertility – Part 2

In this second part of a two-part article Janetta Bensouilah explains how aromatherapists can engage with current work in acupuncture using oriental medicine to help couples conceive



As a practising acupuncturist, I never tire of exploring the vast body of traditional knowledge and experience that lies at the heart of Oriental medicine. For me, working in the field of reproductive medicine gives me insights into how a traditional medical model representing thousands

of years of experience and development can sit comfortably alongside some of the most advanced modern medical interventions and improve their success, as confirmed by recent research (Paulus *et al* 2002; Westergaard *et al* 2006).

This article follows on from Part 1 (published in *In Essence* Vol. 5 No 4) by showing how Oriental medicine is used by acupuncturists to improve the chances of couples conceiving, both naturally and through assisted reproductive techniques (ART), and how aromatherapists may engage with this work.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

Through the work of Mojay (1996), Battaglia (2003) and others, many aromatherapists are familiar with some of the basic philosophy that underpins Oriental medicine as applied to aromatherapy.

Below I give a brief overview of key concepts that are useful for aromatherapists wishing to use these teachings in their work with infertile couples.

ENERGY

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), the body is seen as a dynamic energy system with complex energetic relationships determining every aspect of our health and well-being. At the heart of TCM, Qi (energy) is the force that infuses every cell in the body, every living organism. It is the circulation of Qi in a network of channels – meridians – throughout the body (that acupuncturists access with needling) that determines our health.

When Qi flow is disrupted, physical or emotional symptoms develop: when Qi movement is smooth and harmonious, health is maintained. In TCM philosophy there is no distinction between the mind and body, and the external environment directly affects both the movement of Qi and its creation. For example, sitting for hours in front of a computer causes Qi to slow down and stagnate, leading to problems such as headaches, dysmenorrhoea, fatigue and emotional fragility.

YIN AND YANG

Energy can be classified as *yin* or *yang* and understanding how these energies relate to the female reproductive cycle adds an interesting dimension to holistic fertility. Normally, fluctuations in *yin* and *yang* through every hour of the day and every stage of the life cycle are subtle and do not disturb our health.

However, when energy is disrupted, signs and symptoms arise that can be understood as manifestations of relative *yin-yang* imbalance. Table 1 gives examples of *yin* and *yang* qualities and functions and Table 2 (opposite) some general indications that these are disrupted.

TABLE 1

EXAMPLES OF YIN AND YANG QUALITIES AND FUNCTIONS

***Yin* Qualities**

moisture, night, dark, slow, passive, cold, quietness, heaviness

***Yin* Functions**

regenerates, rest and replenishment, cools, moistens and lubricates, nourishes and calms

***Yang* Qualities**

dryness, day, fast, active, hot, upward movement, quickness, lightness

***Yang* Functions**

transforms (digestion/metabolism), warms, circulates and transports, protects and holds everything in place

TABLE 2

INDICATORS OF YIN–YANG IMBALANCE

<i>Yin</i> Deficiency	<i>Yang</i> Deficiency
Feelings of heat in the face, hands and feet, especially in the evening or at night	Feelings of cold
Easily flushed cheeks	Lethargy and fatigue, lack of motivation
Dry skin, hair and eyes	Loose stools and poor digestion generally
Scanty, dark urine	Clear, frequent, copious urination
Disturbed sleep	Cold hands and feet
Irritability, jitteriness, nervousness, agitated mind	Loss of libido
Dry stools, constipation	Prolapse
Scanty menstrual bleeding, short menstrual periods	Pale complexion, puffy eye bags
Vaginal dryness	Sleeps abundantly but not energised on waking
Night sweating, hot flushes	Dull aches that worsen in cold conditions
	Cold and weakness in the back and knees

THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE IN TCM

In western medicine, the menstrual cycle is described in terms of the various interactions and feedback loops involving hormones affecting the ovaries and uterus. Similarly, in TCM philosophy, the ebb and flow of *yin* and *yang* energies reflect the cycle. An ideal cycle is regular, lasting 28 days (although 25–35 day cycles, so long as they are regular each month, are not generally cause for concern). There should be no disturbing premenstrual signs and symptoms, blood is fresh red without clots and bleeding lasts for around five days.

This ideal represents a balanced *yin–yang* cycle and can be understood as *yin* accumulating and building in the first half of the cycle, seen in an increase in cervical secretions, until around day 14 when the blood (*yin*) is back to normal and the body is ready to ovulate thus giving way to *yang*. Ovulation marks the transformation where cool, tranquil *yin* becomes warm, active *yang*. This accounts for the increase in temperature, seen if basal body temperature (BBT) charts are monitored. It is during this dynamic *yang* phase that fertilisation occurs.

If fertilisation does not take place, the *yang* cycle continues until menstruation, at the start of which *yin* takes over once more. It is the accumulation of *yang* that leads to many premenstrual disturbances. In order for a woman to be fertile, a balance between *yin–yang* must be maintained.

TCM PHASES OF THE CYCLE

The preceding cycles can be further divided into four phases:

- 1 Menstrual
- 2 Post-menstrual
- 3 Ovulation
- 4 Premenstrual

TABLE 3

THE FOUR PHASES OF THE TCM MENSTRUAL CYCLE

Phase	Predominant Hormone	BBT*	<i>Yin–Yang</i>
Menstrual	Oestrogen	Low temperature phase	Growth of <i>Yin</i>
Post menstrual	Oestrogen	Low temperature phase with the lowest temperature	Extreme <i>Yin</i> ready for transformation to <i>Yang</i>
Ovulation	Oestrogen Progesterone	High temperature phase	<i>Yin</i> has transformed to <i>Yang</i>
Pre-menstrual	Progesterone	High temperature phase	<i>Yang</i> grows

* BBT = basal body temperature

The first three fall into the *yin* follicular or oestrogenic phase, whilst the premenstrual (post-ovulation) time is the *yang* luteal or progestogenic phase (see Table 3 on page 23). In the follicular (or proliferative) phase the uterine lining proliferates to provide a receptive environment for a fertilised egg. This follows the initial shedding from the first day of the period.

TCM places a high emphasis on noting the nature of the menstrual bleed, as it is important that the lining is shed and remodelled efficiently for implantation of the fertilised egg to be successful. The disintegration and shedding of the endometrial tissue reflects the combined movement of Qi, *yin* and blood and signs to watch out for to further understand this will be discussed later. During the *yin* phase, the follicles grow and one becomes dominant until releasing an egg at ovulation and triggering the switch to the *yang* phase and production of progesterone.

GAUGING FERTILITY INDICATORS

BASAL BODY TEMPERATURE (BBT)

Also called the waking temperature, the BBT needs to be taken at the same time each morning following at least three hours of sleep and before eating, drinking or much movement. It is used to assess the subtle changes in temperature before and following ovulation. It is necessary to record the temperature every day of the cycle and factors that affect it include electric blankets, drinking alcohol the previous evening, restless sleep, illness, cuddling a child or partner, medication and illness. These need to be noted on a chart.

An average chart shows a slight drop in temperature just before ovulation followed by a sharp rise, which should remain stable as a result of the progesterone (*yang*) for around 12–14 days before dropping as the period begins if no conception has occurred. If however conception has happened, there will be another rise, or it will at least remain high.

Where BBT charts can be very helpful is that they can both confirm whether ovulation has taken place and indicate that a woman is no longer fertile in a given cycle: ovulation takes place around 24 hours before or after the temperature rises. However, there are advantages and disadvantages in using BBT charts and careful guidance and monitoring by the therapist is needed if problems are to be avoided. One major problem is that, for some women, the strict daily routine needed can be stressful, adding to what can already be a regimented approach to trying for a baby. In anxious clients, charting can add to the anxiety and, if it is seen to be contributing to the anxiety about not falling pregnant, is probably best avoided.

Acupuncturists and herbalists glean much useful information from quite detailed analyses of BBT charts. What is useful for aromatherapy practice is to see the state of the *yin-yang* relationship: if the body's *yin* energy is deficient, temperatures in the follicular phase are high, or if *yang* is weak this cannot sustain the rise in

temperature post-ovulation. In either case, dietary changes may help and are given at the end of the article.

For aromatherapists, the most practical aspect of using BBT charts is to use them to establish whether and when ovulation occurs (following a three-month cycle of monitoring gives a good time-scale of information). If no ovulation is happening, other interventions are likely to be necessary, depending on the woman's age. More details on BBT charting with sample charts for free download are available on the internet – at www.tcoyf.com for example.

FERTILE MUCUS

As well as the uterine lining developing in the *yin* phase, fertile cervical mucus is produced to allow sperm to survive and travel through the uterus and fallopian tubes for possible conception. Cervical mucus is relatively dry immediately after the period but as *yin* accumulates, the mucus builds up, has a moist creamy texture, becoming clear and slippery around ovulation. This often described by Fertility Awareness educators as resembling raw egg white and the last day of the stretchy secretions, often experienced as a moist sensation in the vagina, is called the *peak day*.

Ideally, there will be plenty of sperm inside the woman's reproductive tract before the peak fertility day as fertile mucus has been produced to aid the sperms' journey before ovulation as the egg is so short-lived – only fertilisable for 6–12 hours (Lyttleton 2004). Drugs that dry or interfere with cervical fluid include clomifene, antihistamines, NSAIDs and some antidepressants (*ibid*).

ASSESSING FERTILITY IN TCM

YIN-YANG IMBALANCES

Lack of (or short-lived) cervical mucus may indicate too much drying heat in the body, caused by too little cooling, moistening *yin*. This is especially likely if other signs of *yin* deficiency are present (Table 2 page 23) and a high BBT is noted during the first half of the cycle. It may also show an excess of *yang* energy. Conversely, a low BBT, with little or no rise to indicate ovulation, indicates *yang* deficiency, especially where other symptoms are present. Bleeding of less than five days tends to point to deficiency in *yin* energy (blood formation).

DISTURBANCES IN QI MOVEMENT

If Qi fails to move harmoniously, signs and symptoms arise in the premenstrual phase and during the period itself. Typically, women experience tender breasts, headaches, abdominal pains, irritability and mood swings, and period cramps. The nature of the menstrual bleed is a good indicator of whether Qi is moving well and enabling the lining to shed: clotted blood and pain indicate Qi is blocked, or stagnated. Pain at ovulation indicates stagnation, as this is the time for the switch from *yin* to *yang* and if Qi is hindered pain results. Generally, the sharper the pain, the greater the level of stagnation present.

TABLE 4

CHINESE MEDICINE AND FOOD CHOICE

General traditional Chinese medicine dietary advice for anyone trying to conceive

- Avoid ice-cream, sorbets, frozen deserts.
- Limit dairy produce (substitute goat/sheep products, oat or rice milk)
- Eat a variety of whole grains (millet, oatmeal, quinoa, buckwheat) and pulses (lentils, chickpeas, kidney beans, aduki beans)
- Eat plenty of green vegetables especially broccoli, spinach, watercress, sprouts, kale, cabbage
- Snack on unsalted seeds and nuts (almonds, macadamias, pumpkin and sunflower)
- Drink at least two litres of filtered water a day, or a mixture of herbal tea and water

Foods for strengthening Yin

- Salads, cucumbers, lightly cooked green leafy vegetables especially spinach and watercress
- Vegetables of all kinds. Cooling foods eg melons, pears, mung beans, sprouts, sushi
- Good quality fish and chicken
- Rice, corn, wheat
- Reduce consumption of meat, pepper, garlic, ginger, onions
- Avoid alcohol, sugar and processed foods

Foods for strengthening Yang

- Lamb or beef dishes, dark poultry, meat-based soups and stews
- Free-range eggs, trout and wild salmon
- Cooked root vegetables, onions, garlic, leeks and fennel
- Cinnamon, ginger, turmeric, black pepper, nutmeg
- Oatmeal, quinoa and buckwheat
- Food and drinks are best eaten cooked and warm
- Avoid salads, raw fruits, frozen desserts, cold drinks

BALANCING THE IMBALANCES

It is not my intention to suggest that the information outlined here is sufficient for aromatherapists to single-handedly address cases of infertility; my view is that an interdisciplinary approach is required.

The complexities inherent in TCM demand an extensive period of study and clinical experience before they can be applied effectively, especially in areas of specialisms such as fertility. Rather, what I hope to stimulate is awareness of how natural fertility indicators can be interpreted by those already familiar with TCM philosophy.

Further, I hope to have contributed to the understanding of how oils may be selected for women trying to conceive by readers already trained in oil energies according to Oriental ideas. Those using acupuncture in their treatments may have an added dimension when planning their treatments if fertility indicators are assessed in ways presented here.

ORIENTAL DIETARY PRINCIPLES FOR IMPROVING FERTILITY

Finally, one important and practical area where aromatherapists can provide really helpful information is simple dietary advice that follows Oriental dietary principles (see Table 4 above). Health is seen as a state of balance in which food choice is key. Regular eating times are important to establish; breakfast is the most important meal in Chinese medicine, ideally taken between 7am and 9am. Seasonal eating is seen as ideal as we then obtain the Qi that we need from the food naturally available to us. Therefore, summer foods such as salads, cucumbers, and melons are ideal for hot weather as they strengthen *yin* energies and cool us. Conversely meats, root vegetables, soups and stews are suitable in winter.

CONCLUSION

This is a huge subject area to cover in just two articles and I have attempted to provide a practical outline; suggestions for further reading follow the references and I am always available to answer any questions that may arise. I believe strongly in a collaborative approach to working with infertile couples and am happy to hear from others working in the field.

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