

Tending the Wind – Chapter 9
Chinese Medicine – Part 1
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Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) encompasses a wide range of related healing modalities, including acupuncture, acupressure, herbal and nutritional therapy, massage, specific exercises, and meditation. The common denominator underlying all TCM methods is the unique Chinese perspective on health and disease, which focuses on whole body/mind harmony as a microcosmic parallel to the harmonic patterns of the natural world. (This will be discussed further in subsequent chapters as it is a complex topic.) In veterinary medicine, acupuncture and herbal therapy are the most commonly used methods in the clinic setting.

Acupuncture involves the placement of thin needles through the skin into superficial soft tissues. Needle placement is very specific according to ancient maps of the body surface, each point having a unique set of effects on both superficial and deep organs and tissues. Needles today are typically stainless steel with a copper, steel or plastic handle. The number of needles used depends on the patient's condition, but most point formulas range between 5 to 15 needles. Dogs and cats usually permit needle insertion without much fuss, either not reacting at all or looking back as if bitten by a flea. As in human acupuncture, though, some points are more sensitive, requiring gradual insertion or acupressure instead.

In small animals, needles are typically left in place anywhere from 5 to 25 minutes depending on point location and patient response. Many veterinary acupuncturists set a timer for 20 minutes and leave the room, a technician later returning to remove the needles. I prefer to stay with my patients the whole time for a couple of reasons: it gives me more time to discuss my patient's condition with my client (not to mention the time bonding with both), and I can monitor my patient's response to the needles as they're working. Just as needle placement is unique to each patient, so too is needle timing. With experience and a good sense of feel, a practitioner can tell when it's time for a needle to come out.

As with chiropractic, it is a normal part of the healing process for a few patients to feel temporarily worse after acupuncture, perhaps for the first 6 to 48 hours. Most, however, don't experience any aggravation, and many have a long sleep after arriving home. Improvement in the patient's condition may be obvious after one session, but most chronic ailments require a few sessions to begin seeing significant change. Acupuncture sessions are typically repeated weekly to start, with the frequency of visits decreasing as improvement becomes more consistent and longer-lasting.

Western science has tried to isolate a specific mechanism of action to explain the effects of acupuncture. One theory is that the needles stimulate specific nerves which alter neural processing in the spinal cord and brain, changing the molecular signals that then go out to the rest of the body. This *neurohormonal mechanism* proposes that the effects of acupuncture are dependent on nerve stimulation alone, ignoring the classical acupuncture pathways called meridians. However, some studies in which the appropriate nerve was deactivated (either by chemical block or physical denervation) showed that acupuncture treatment still achieved its desired effects. The neurohormonal theory also has difficulty explaining other observations, including the multiple effects of stimulating a single acupuncture point and the distribution of many important points away from significant nerve pathways. A competing theory, the *electromagnetic mechanism*, is based on the fact that most points studied have both lower electrical resistance and increased electrical conductivity than the surrounding skin. These properties vary depending on the disease state (with increased conductivity noted in points related to the diseased organ), physical activity, emotional state, time of day, and changes in the environment such as temperature and season. In the emerging science of bioelectromagnetics, it is known that the body's electromagnetic (EM) fields regulate

development and physiology; such EM fields are low-frequency and low-intensity, similar to those created during acupuncture treatment. The microcurrent generated as a metallic needle is inserted through the skin causes fluctuations in the patient's EM field, likely altering this field in very specific ways depending on the points chosen. Such a non-molecular mechanism can affect the nerves (and the balance of molecules they release) but is not dependent on them, and early research suggests a correlation between the ancient meridian maps and modern EM field measurements. As research progresses, it is likely that even subtler forms of energy and information exchange will be discovered.

Chinese herbs have also been studied from a Western perspective with attempts to isolate the active ingredients of single herbs and formulas. These attempts have been successful in some cases, but not others, and again fail to explain or predict the full range of the observed therapeutic effects. As with acupuncture, it is likely that non-molecular mechanisms will prove important to a full understanding of Chinese herbal therapy. Classical texts discuss the thermal properties of herbs, as well as how they affect the flow of bioenergy through the body in a holographic manner. It is only from this perspective that the most effective formula is chosen.

An individual herb can be used alone, but most commonly Chinese herbs are combined into formulas. Ingredients are chosen for their harmonious interactions, one or two herbs addressing the main pattern of disharmony, with the others serving to assist or modify the actions of the leading herbs. (It is interesting to note that the Chinese character for "harmony" is a culinary reference to the flavorful blending of ingredients.) A typical herbal formula, like acupuncture formulas, includes between 5 and 15 herbs. Formulas may be sold in their raw form and prepared as a tea, or in powder or pill form. Most veterinary preparations are sold as powders to be mixed in food, or as pills. Palatability can be an issue with the powders, but most dogs (and even a few cats) will eat their food without much objection if any.

Chinese herbs are usually taken daily, and can be used concurrently with regular acupuncture treatment. Herbs tend to be used for more chronic and deep-seated illness than acupuncture, but either or both may benefit a given situation. Some herbs can be toxic to small animals, and these are typically avoided or used only in minute doses. Where information is available, interactions between herbs and pharmaceutical drugs are taken into consideration. But because Chinese herbal formulas are balanced mixtures that don't rely on large doses of any one ingredient, harmful interactions are much less likely than with treatment paradigms that use a single herb approach.

To choose the appropriate acupuncture or herbal formula, TCM practitioners use a combination of history-taking, physical examination, point palpation, and tongue and pulse evaluation. History-taking in TCM is as detailed as in homeopathy, including many more questions than would typically be asked in a conventional setting. Physical examination is equally detailed, paying more attention to the texture, color, temperature and overall feel of tissues – especially over acupuncture points. The tongue gives unique insight into the patient's pattern of disharmony, based on its coating, color, texture and movement. Different locations on the tongue also tend to map which internal organs are involved. Finally, the arterial pulses inside the hindlegs are palpated for their speed, quality, strength and depth – each detail providing clues toward the pattern of illness and the treatment required.

But what exactly is a "pattern of disharmony" in TCM? How are points on the skin surface related to internal organs as well as superficial musculoskeletal structures? And why are the internal organs given many more functions in TCM than in Western medicine, being involved also in mental and emotional illness? The answers lie in understanding the profoundly holographic nature of TCM theory, its philosophical origins, and even its language.