

## Acupuncture and the 50-minute hour revisited

By Andrew Prescott L.Ac.

I agree to a certain extent with Bob Flaws' comments in the October 2007 issue of Acupuncture Today regarding once a week acupuncture treatment. I believe that his arguments make sense within the context and philosophical underpinnings of (for want of a better term) a TCM approach; however, they do not represent the perspective of the full spectrum of acupuncture styles and modalities.

Many Europeans who first explored acupuncture 30 years or more ago, went to Taiwan, Korea and Japan, and so what they brought back did not conform to the mainland Chinese approach. I do not know if once a week treatment is found in any of these areas, but even if it is a Western innovation it is one that makes a lot of sense in the context of Five Element approach and the Western situation. And within the Five Element tradition it is well supported format to follow and I would be surprised if this is a purely Western development.

Within a Five Element (for want of a better term) approach there are differing philosophical underpinnings, relative to TCM. Five Element stresses: 1. a 'least action' approach (finer needles, fewer needles, manipulated less forcefully and more superficially), 2. Balancing the individual's energies rather than seeking to explain and/or address the manifest ailment directly.

The Five Element approach can be seen as rooted more in the Nan Jing. But the philosophical basis of it is also in the Su Wen. The Su Wen in Chapter 65 talks of *nì* (opposition, upstream, counter-flow) and *cóng* (correspondence, downstream, flow) treatment. These principles are clearly the basis of the principles of 'attack' and 'support', and tonification and sedation, but actually have broader implications. To borrow from Western psychology they suggest 'non-directive' and 'directive' treatment intent. Five Element is clearly more non-directive in intent.

With Five Element treatment the emphasis on balancing and least action and non-directive treatment intent, leads to different expectations from the mainstream of TCM. Patients are told not to anticipate immediate results. If this does happen it is considered a bonus. When people do respond it is often in conformity with Herring's Law of Cure. Often a treatment response will occur in 24-48 hours. This will sometimes include an apparent aggravation of symptoms, followed by an improvement that is usually sustained as long as other factors (such as ongoing lifestyle issues or external factors) do not counteract this. The person who tries to catch up on months or years of yard-work because their back is finally better, is a typical example of how nothing is set in stone. It is an intrinsic idea of Five Element that you can not 'have your cake and eat it', i.e. immediate relief and long term resolution may not be wholly compatible outcomes. Worsely stated this more categorically than I do, but it is arguable that he was often being rhetorical in his teachings because he saw how hard it was for people to follow an approach that was more idealistic.

Five Element practitioners often place relatively greater emphasis on the pulses in the evaluation of frequency of treatment. The Five Element practitioner is looking for an improvement in the three cardinal qualities of the pulse: You Shen (Spirit), You Wei (Stomach/Qi), You Ben (Root). This is called the 'CF response' by Five Element practitioners, (but is not usually articulated in the language used here). Usually this will not hold at first for a full week, and I have from time to time, when possible seen a patient twice in the first week. But very soon the response process as described above requires a certain time to be allowed to run its course, and the pulses begin to 'hold'. After sometimes as little as four sessions, and as

many as ten (with some variation beyond these), the pulses begin to hold such that the patient is moved to fortnightly treatment, and again at a certain point, to every three weeks and so on (with increasing unpredictability).

One important exception that I have found in my own practice is the condition, called Aggressive Energy by J.R.Worsely, that I would call pathogenic heat in the yin organs (I have to thank Bob Flaws for his explanations of ‘Yin Fire theory’ and ‘Law of Similar Transformation’ for helping me understand this concept). I have found that as this often needs several sessions to clear, a week may be too long to wait and greater success is achieved by clearing this on a daily basis for several sessions.

Five Element is clearly not normally addressing the acute or virulent and I would be first to agree that it would not be the first choice of approach in emergency or epidemic situations. But for the kind of persistent or chronic problems that are most common in our Western practices it is ideally suited. Indeed (paradoxically) it often helps with many patients that the texts suggest are beyond acupuncture; for example, when a person is severely depleted especially in yin and blood. It is easy to see these as situations that can not be forced, and where more forceful and intensive acupuncture treatment would indeed be contra-indicated.

Just to address very briefly a few of the other points that Bob Flaws raised: Five Element practitioners would not generally be able to, or want to see multiple patients at the same time, and the idea of having an assistant to do some of the technical aspects of treatment is moot if treatment is not seen as purely technical. Rather like a massage therapist having someone else do the massage!

It is important that we recognize that acupuncture is not one homogenous entity, and we must make sure that in our discussions we recognize that each of us may have a limited viewpoint based upon our particular approach and experience.

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