

CONTENTS

East Meets West

BY LENA HUANG

Integrating traditional Chinese medicine may ease side effects.

As a law school librarian, Jenny Roquemore is accustomed to reading about different perspectives. So when she was diagnosed with HER2-positive, estrogen receptor-negative breast cancer, she explored not only conventional therapies, but also non-conventional outlets, and found herself drawn to one in particular—traditional Chinese medicine.

Roquemore had a lumpectomy followed by radiation and chemotherapy. But during chemotherapy, she experienced pain and low energy, and remembered from her research that acupuncture might help. Her doctors consented, and after her chemotherapy was completed, she added Chinese herbs to help combat other side effects.

Roquemore admits she doesn't know if adding traditional Chinese medicine, or TCM, had any effect on her cancer, but she does know it helped her feel balanced during and after the chaos of cancer. "Western and Chinese medicines are not substitutes for each other; they are complementary. I feel the acupuncture and herbs protected me, helped preserve my health, and kept me on the right track," says Roquemore, 59, from Austin, Texas, adding that her cancer is in remission.

Roquemore is not alone in turning to integrative treatments such as TCM. The American Cancer Society estimates up to 50 percent of cancer patients use some type of integrative (also referred to as complementary) therapy, and more than \$34 billion is spent each year on these treatments. As these therapies become more popular, more research is being funded to determine what they actually do in the body and how they may help combat the side effects of cancer treatment.

Healing Holistically

TCM is a system of medical diagnosis and treatment that has evolved over the past 3,000 years into a set of practices that are used to treat ailments and maintain health. These practices include herbal medicine, acupuncture, and other therapies.

Cancer is viewed differently by TCM physicians than by Western doctors partly because TCM is based on the Daoist belief that everything in the universe is interconnected.

TCM views the human body as an energy system with *chi* being the "energy" or

“life force.” *Chi* flows through invisible channels in the body called meridians, and TCM therapies, such as acupuncture, are used to unblock the *chi* flow in the meridians. Blockages are believed to be caused by myriad sources both inside and outside the body, such as dietary habits, genetics, past diseases, exercise, work, environment, lifestyle, and sexual activity.

View Illustration: Pressure Points

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“When we look at traditional Chinese medicine, we see that a lot of therapies are focused on keeping the body balanced, to keep the *chi* flowing through the body and to stop blockages of *chi* from happening, which—in TCM theory—is what can lead to illness and to cancer,” says Lorenzo Cohen, PhD, director of M.D. Anderson Cancer Center’s Integrative Medicine Program and a researcher on TCM and cancer.

Licensed acupuncturist Yuxin He, PhD, MD (China), who treats Roquemore, says if the *chi* is healthy and strong, there is less chance for disease. The well-balanced body can resist more ailments, says He, so “when the body is weak from any disease, such as cancer, TCM works to unblock the accumulations that form a mass or tumor.”

He prescribed acupuncture and an herbal formula for Roquemore. “Acupuncture helps side effects before, during, and after treatment,” says He. “Chemotherapy can have some complications, so we do not advise using herbs one day before and one day after chemotherapy because it can affect your treatment, but we can use acupuncture at that time to alleviate side effects.”



Dr. Yuxin consults with breast cancer survivor Jenny Roquemore.
Photo by Kevin Gourley

After treatment, TCM therapies are meant to build immunity and prevent recurrence, although research in this area is inconclusive. Patients should always consult with an herbalist before deciding on herbs, warns He, because some herbs may have a negative effect. For example, he says, some may mimic estrogen production, which is counterproductive for breast cancer patients whose tumors are estrogen-sensitive.

The TCM philosophy also states that maintaining a healthy diet based on organic foods and avoiding red meat, fat, and spicy or oily foods can build immunity and fight disease. “TCM believes that stress and depression affect the *chi*, so mental balance is important, too,” He adds.

For Roquemore, He recommended exercise and walking to promote better sleep and “agreed with me that meditation was helpful in calming down and alleviating worry,” she says.



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—Lorenzo Cohen, PhD

Researching Therapies

With more patients turning to integrative therapies, research in that area is increasing. “I think there is a better understanding now that many of the treatments that the Chinese have been using for hundreds, if not thousands, of years may, in fact, be useful in the battle against cancer,” says Cohen, who is the principal investigator for a \$2.8 million grant received by M.D. Anderson from the National Cancer Institute to study TCM and cancer with Fudan University Cancer Hospital in Shanghai, China.

Cohen says many current studies with Fudan University are promising. One study is examining the use of acupuncture to prevent and treat radiation-induced xerostomia, or dry mouth. Another study is examining acupuncture to treat nausea from chemotherapy for liver cancer or liver metastasis.

“Ten years ago, the National Institutes of Health released a consensus statement that the data were strong to support the use of acupuncture in treating chemotherapy-induced nausea,” says Cohen. “There is a lot of ongoing research in this area, data suggesting acupuncture is good for managing cancer-related fatigue, aspects of pain, hot flashes, and for helping treat sleep-related disturbances and gastrointestinal disorders.”

Indeed, a recent search of clinical trials revealed about 30 studies involving acupuncture and cancer-related symptoms or treatment side effects. About 15 trials focused on TCM herbal or natural products and cancer. Cohen is also overseeing a phase II randomized study on a TCM natural product called *Huachansu*, an extract from the skin of a poisonous toad, combined with the anti-cancer agent Gemzar (gemcitabine) for its effect on pancreatic cancer.

For survivors interested in pursuing TCM therapies, Cohen and He agree the best approach is for conventional medicine doctors and TCM doctors to collaborate to optimize treatment. Cohen suggests finding a TCM doctor that has specific experience working with cancer patients.

“Also important is that the source providing natural products in TCM is a reputable, high-quality company. There is a concern that products can be tainted or have contaminants,” says Cohen. “Also make sure acupuncture is delivered by a licensed, credentialed practitioner who uses sterile technique and only disposable needles.”

Six years after her diagnosis, Roquemore continues her TCM therapies and believes they have helped her so much that she persuaded her husband, Robert Zirkel, to use TCM therapies after his surgery for melanoma. She says, “I feel the herbs and acupuncture are keeping me healthy and well, keeping my immune

system strong, and I'm benefiting from some kind of prevention."