The Importance of Treating Blood Stasis

In enduring (chronic) disease, there will be blood stasis.
- Statement of Fact in TCM

What is blood stasis?

In holistic Chinese medicine, there is a concept, the understanding of which is essential to the treatment of almost any chronic illness; that concept is referred to as blood stasis. In blood stasis, the blood - which should be circulating - has become stuck or static. Indeed, the very process of aging inevitably results in some amount of static blood becoming stuck somewhere in the body. In fact, in traditional Chinese medicine, senility is chiefly blamed on static blood.

In traditional Chinese medicine the function of the blood is to nourish and moisten. This statement explains why aging involves signs of drying out and becoming wrinkled and withered. The logic in traditional Chinese medicine is that if blood is static, i.e., not circulating, then it cannot perform its function of nourishing and moistening. Why does blood become static in the first place? How does one recognize the presence of such a pathology and what can be done therapeutically to move the static blood?

Qi Stagnation, Stress and Blood Stasis

In holistic medicine, it is a dogmatic statement of fact that the “qi moves the blood; If the qi moves, the blood moves; if the qi stops (i.e.: stagnates), the blood stops (i.e. becomes static.)”

There is one single disease-mechanism at work in quite-nearly all adults at one time or another in varying degrees of severity; that mechanism involves the effect of stress on the liver. The liver is assigned the role of maintaining the smooth and free flow of qi. Desire requires a movement of qi; to wit, in order to fulfill a desire – no matter what it is - qi must move. But most adults who live and work and raise children in society come face to face with a frustrating truth which is that many desires everyday must be deferred or denied, set aside and left unfulfilled. The inability to fulfill a desire or the willful restraint not to fulfill a desire
causes harm to the liver’s ability to make qi flow smoothly and freely. The feeling of frustration which results from unfulfilled desire is qi stagnation. If the qi moves the blood and the qi is stagnant, then inevitably and logically, blood must end up static as well.

This in fact is precisely what happens. The above scenario is a simplification of the various other possible mechanisms which may be involved. However, the root cause of static blood can be traced to the liver’s failure to maintain freely flowing qi.

**Signs and Symptoms of Blood Stasis**

Upon examining the signs and symptoms of blood stasis, one realizes the enormous prevalence of this often overlooked aspect of chronic illness:

- Fever
- Aching pain – fixed in one place and “sharp” or “stabbing”
- Bleeding – extravasation of blood from any orifice
- Distension or fullness
- Itching or dry or scaly skin
- Dry mouth
- Excessive dreams
- Poor memory
- Heart pain palpitations
- Confusion
- Depression or excessive emotions
- Abdominal pain, distention heat, dry throat, nausea, lack of appetite
- Cough, shortness of breath, phlegm
- Urinary problems of all kinds

This is only a partial list but even at a glance one can see at such a list covers nearly every patient coming for treatment.
How can we treat blood stasis?

Static blood is such a common aspect of patients in North America in the 21st century that practitioners must include some treatment methods to move the blood. In addition to ‘coursing the liver,’ and balancing whatever other patterns might be present, certain formulas are especially aimed at moving static blood. Of these, four in particular are useful to the Barefoot doctor.

- Xue fu zhu yu tang
- Ge xia zhu yu tang
- Shao fu zhu yu tang
- Shen tong shu yu tang

These four formulas will move static blood the upper, middle and lower regions of the body respectively and/or treat pain from blood stasis in the whole body (as is sometimes the case in fibromyalgia). Adding these formulas to your patient’s treatment regimen will often enough show dramatic and immediate results.

I can tell you from experience that remembering to look for and treat blood stasis will improve your clinical outcomes when dealing with chronically ill patients.

  Translated by Tang Guo-shu and Bob Flaws. Blue Poppy Press, Boulder Colorado, 2004