

Chinese Herbal Medicine – Science, safety aspects and good clinical practice

Members

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Introduction

Chinese Herbal Medicine (CHM) is one of the great traditional medical systems with an unbroken tradition going back to the 3rd century BC. It refers to the systematic empirical evaluation of herbs in China, one of the hotspots of botanical biodiversity due to the fact that over 12% of all known plants have their origin in China. Throughout history CHM has continually developed in response to clinical challenges and this process still continues supported by modern research, integration of modern western diagnostic techniques and knowledge.

The underlying systematic diagnostic procedure, the physiological and pathological ideas and syndrome diagnosis are the very core of Chinese Medicine and all related techniques have their roots here.

Good clinical practice

A common traditional Chinese recipe combines 2-15 herbs to enhance efficacy, ameliorate side effects and help with additional symptoms. The appropriate application of CHM, which uses also some very potent herbal compounds which may be in an inappropriate way/dosage sometimes toxic, needs a very good clinical training and medical knowledge, especially about interactions with western drugs. Therefore ICMART is fighting for an appropriate education and only physicians should be allowed to use CHM.

There is enough evidence to prove the efficacy of CHM for atopic dermatitis, irritable bowel syndrome and allergic conditions as shown by some good clinical trials.

Much more good data are needed to prove all other conditions which can be treated with good results and seem to be efficient.

Some examples:

- acute viral infections of the respiratory tract,
- chronic rhinosinusitis,
- possibly effective in infections with multiresistant bacteriae (MRSA),
- diarrhea and colitis,
- dysmenorrhoea, premenstrual complex, menopausal syndrome,
- infertility and impotence treatment,
- acute and recurrent cystitis and prostatitis,
- some rheumatological diseases

Safety aspects

CHM is relatively safe when prescribed by a properly trained physician.

One major topic in safety is quality, identity and purity of raw herbs, granulates, decoctions and all other forms of CHM, which have to be checked by all parties and must be strictly certified. CHM is normally provided by wholesaling companies, drugs

should only be bought in trained and certified pharmacies to assess the highest quality standards (in Germany, Switzerland, Austria this aim has been mainly achieved).

However, CHM is an allopathic medicinal tradition. The medicinal ingredients and their interactions with the human body result in pharmacological effects.

Several side effects are known or may occur:

- *allergic reactions*,
- *hepatotoxicity*:
several publications reported raised liver enzymes caused by traditional CHM in single cases. With high doses and pre-existing hepatic diseases, a disturbance of liver function became more likely. Cases of severe hepatic failures have been reported, although in these cases, there were indications that they were caused by idiosyncratic reactions
- *nephrotoxicity*:
all actually allowed CHM drugs seem not to be nephrotoxic. However, till the 1990's some CHM drugs (mutong, xixin) were mixed with teratogenic and nephrotoxic aristolochia species. In China, USA and the EU all plants which could be contaminated with aristolochia acids are banned.
- Interactions with western prescribed drugs
- Side Effects caused by non-observance of contraindications
- Side effects caused by non appropriate treatment
- Side effects caused by mistaken identity, contamination or undeclared additives: There have been some reports about CHM patent remedies to contain undeclared added components such as cortisone. Therefore only certified, pure CHM from pharmacies should be used.

For German speaking countries the "Center for Therapeutic Safety in CHM" (www.ctca.de) works since more than 15 years successfully, the ICMART (patronized by SMS) members help to cultivate and grow CHM in Europe and China with GACP and biological standards in a landmark project since 1998.

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