

Acupuncture in the setting of infertility and IVF

Forward

It is an honour to be asked to write a foreward for the second edition of this wonderful book - a book which, from a science perspective, peels away some of the layers of mystery surrounding Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). It is a book which brings TCM into the modern world of reproductive medicine. In some ways, I am a strange choice of author. I am not a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). In fact I am an IVF specialist with a science background, and I do not advocate TCM for everyone. However, I am also a clinician who is, above all, interested in the art of healing. And over the last few years I have been lucky enough to get to know Jane Lyttleton and many of her patients, and they have demonstrated the powerful potential of synergy between TCM and modern Western medicine. A recent survey in my Sydney IVF clinic showed that over 60% of patients used complementary therapies, most of them TCM. It was interesting that very few (of those who used it, and also those who did not) had an opinion or cared whether or not TCM was proven to be effective or not. This illustrates the problem Western medicine has with TCM. Large numbers of patients seem to be very keen on trying it, with relatively little concern about actual effectiveness.

In my IVF clinic it is not uncommon for patients to ask – before they have even completed their tests or new treatment protocol – ‘What else can I do?’ My offering of the latest and most sophisticated fertility treatments imaginable does not seem to cut the mustard. My promise of the best success rates that can possibly be achieved, my discussion of new scientific papers and mechanisms of new drugs, my very presence in an upmarket, gleaming and famous clinic does not give enough confidence. Something else is needed. What is that?

The thing that modern patients miss is to be taken seriously as an individual. This is not difficult to appreciate, but very difficult to address adequately. The success of Western diagnostic and therapeutic regimes is clear to all, and few patients would fully turn their back on that approach. But in reality, none of us like the idea of ‘playing the odds’ with our health. In other words, if a specialist tells a patient that she would have a 30% chance of success with an IVF cycle, rather than accepting the odds, she (as most of us surely) would immediately start to think of ways of ‘getting into that 30% group’. Some would regard this as irrational. After all, if we truly knew how to get our patients into that 30% group, we would do whatever is necessary to do it. But the point is that IVF, infertility treatment and medicine in general simply cannot guarantee outcomes. Our impotence is the reason we discuss statistics.

This is the time to be frank - TCM does not guarantee outcomes either. But rather than focusing simply on the ‘outcome’ or ‘endpoint’, TCM showcases the ‘journey’. It puts the patient centre stage, so that whatever the outcome, the patient can see that she has done the best for herself. She has tried to address the mystery of illness and pain from

a personal perspective, and so feels empowered. This is often the opposite of feelings in conventional Western medicine when failure of treatment (and sometimes even success) leaves a feeling of being put on a conveyor belt, squeezed into a difficult place and spat out the other side - the feeling of being 'just another statistic'.

TCM has the longest tradition of all complementary therapies. It has a unique diagnostic system that is still inexplicable to Western science. It regards every condition in every patient as a particular set of circumstances that cannot be generalised. It is in some ways the antithesis of statistics. Its success in the management of infertility is therefore difficult to assess. But let us consider what we mean by success. While the bottom line of achieving a live birth is clearly fundamental, there are other markers which seem to matter a lot to our patients, such as: (1) hands on support and confidence boosting, (2) the reassurance that whole body function is being considered, (3) alternative diagnostic pathways that leave open the possibility that individualised success rate can be improved. Even hard nosed scientists would surely not begrudge any of these potential gains, especially if the end result is to get their patients to keep on trying. Those who keep trying will be more likely to succeed of course. This is the cynical scientific view of TCM.

Advocates of TCM make far greater claims of course, such as its ability to improve egg and sperm quality, endometrial receptivity, IVF success rates and even livebirth rates. These claims have huge implications, and need to be explored in an open and rational manner. This process has so far stumbled on the wide gap that still exists between the vested interests of Western medicine and complementary practitioners. Some randomised trials with acupuncture have been done (remarkable efforts in themselves) and some have demonstrated benefit – the increased success rate following acupuncture on the day of IVF embryo transfer is perhaps the best known. But we will all gain so much more through greater integration, respect and willingness to explore the unknown. This applies to both the scientific community and the TCM community. The enormous achievement of this book is the way in which science and TCM are used together to explain the various aspects of female infertility. The problems are therefore accessible to both sides of the chasm, and should encourage each side to learn more about the other.

There is little to gain in advocates of TCM or Western medicine sticking firmly to their side of the divide. That simply creates suspicion and conflict, and confusion for our patients. As a scientist, I would like to see more TCM trials, and if trials are difficult, then at least more audit and reporting of TCM outcomes. We need all practitioners to rationally assess their interventions, and to not be afraid to change them as indicated. This book is an immense achievement because not only does it give an excellent account of TCM, but it does it in the context of Western anatomy and physiology, it describes cases and anecdotal reports, and also the clinical trials that have been done. It is an essential reference for any modern fertility clinic.