

Warm-needle Acupuncture & Low Back Pain in the Elderly

abstracted & translated by

Bob Flaws, L.Ac., FNAAOM (USA), FRCHM (UK)

Keywords: Chinese medicine, acupuncture, geriatrics, low back pain, warm needle

On page 55 of issue #1, 2009 of the *Zhe Jiang Zhong Yi Za Zhi (Zhejiang Journal of Chinese Medicine)*, Zang Ming and Guo Chun-yuan published an article titled, “The Treatment of 100 cases of Kidney Yang Vacuity Low Back Pain in the Elderly with Supplementing the Kidneys Warm-needle Technique.” A summary of this article is presented below.

Cohort description:

There were a total of 200 cases of low back pain in the elderly enrolled in this two-wing comparison study. These 200 cases were randomly divided into two equal groups – a treatment group and a comparison group. In the treatment group, there were 61 males and 39 females with an average age of 67.37 years. These patients had suffered from low back pain for from four days to five months. In the comparison group, there were 58 males and 42 females with an average age of 65.36 years. These patients had suffered from low back pain for from three days to six months. Therefore, in terms of sex, age, and duration of disease, these two groups were deemed statistically comparable for the purposes of this study.

Treatment method:

The treatment group received warm-needle acupuncture at:

Shen Shu (Bl 23)

Da Chang Shu (Bl 25)

Guan Yuan (CV 4)

Patients were first needled perpendicularly with 0.30 X 50mm fine needles. After obtaining the qi and stimulating the points with even supplementing/even draining hand technique to produce a heavy distended feeling in the local area, three cones of moxa were burned on the handles of each needle. This was done once per day for six treatments. A one-day rest was given and this regimen was repeated for four consecutive weeks.

Patients in the comparison group were orally administered Gui Fu Ba Wei Wan (Cinnamon & Aconite Eight Flavors Pill), one pill BID. This group was also treated for a continuous four weeks.

During this treatment, any other Chinese or Western medicines for low back pain were suspended in both groups.

Study outcomes:

Cure was defined as complete disappearance of low back pain and any other accompanying symptoms. Some effect was defined as a marked improvement in low back pain as well as improvement in any other accompanying symptoms. No effect was defined as no obvious improvement in either the low back pain or other accompanying symptoms. The following table shows the outcomes in both groups based on these criteria.

Group	Cured	Some effect	No effect	Total effectiveness rate
Treatment	50	43	7	93%
Comparison	23	42	35	65%

This table shows that the treatment group got much better curative and overall effectiveness rates than did the comparison group. There was also a 10-point pain scale used in this study which was analyzed before and after treatment. The following table shows mean changes in this pain scale from before to after treatment.

Group	Before treatment	After treatment	Mean change
Treatment	6.41 ± 1.37	2.55 ± 1.34	5.23 ± 1.83
Comparison	6.16 ± 1.71	4.97 ± 1.68	1.61 ± 1.27

Thus there was a large difference in the mean change from before to after treatment in these two groups, with the treatment group showing a much greater mean reduction in pain.

Discussion:

According to Drs. Zang and Guo, low back pain in the elderly is mostly due to kidney vacuity. This is because the low back is the mansion of the kidneys and the kidneys govern the bones and engender the marrow. Thus, if there is kidney vacuity, this may lead to loss of nourishment of the low back resulting in low back pain. Therefore, Drs. Zang and Guo believe that this condition should be treated based on the principles of supplementing the kidneys and warming yang, strengthening the sinews and strengthening the low back, supporting the righteous and eliminating evils. Shen Shu is the back transport point of the kidney viscus which can supplement the kidneys and strengthen the low back. Da Chang Shu is where the yang ming large intestine bowel qi is transported and flows. It is also a point located on the low back region. Needling it can course and regulate the viscera and bowels, free the flow and disinhibit the low back and lower extremities, and strengthen both the lower and upper backs. Thus it can augment Shen Shu's ability to supplement the kidneys and strengthen the low back. Guan Yuan secures the root and banks the source in order to aid the qi within the kidneys. When these points are additionally treated with warm-needle technique, the power of the heat warms yang and scatters cold, dispels dampness and frees the flow of impediment. Thus the otherwise recalcitrant condition of low back pain in the elderly due to kidney yang vacuity is eliminated.

Western readers should note that acupuncture treatment with warm-needle technique was given six days per week for four consecutive weeks. It is impossible to say whether a less intense treatment schedule would achieve the same results. However, administration of Gui Fu Ba Wei Wan also did get results. Therefore, a reasonable compromise might be fewer treatments (perhaps two per week for four weeks) combined with oral administration of Gui Fu Ba Wei Wan (a.k.a. Shen Qi Wan, Kidney Qi Pill).