

ACADEMIC EXPLORATION

A Brief on Pain and Its Patterns in Chinese Medicine

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ABSTRACT Pain is the most common symptom in clinics. Therefore, the quality, time course and location of pain are important for the diagnosis and treatment. However, pain is very difficult to define, and it is one of the conditions poorly understood by the medical sciences. In Western medicine pain is often described in terms of a penetrating or tissue-destructive process and/or emotional reactions, but in Chinese medicine the pathogenesis and description of pain are different. It is described based on the theories and pathogenesis of Chinese medicine, and the patients' feeling according to their languages and cultures. Thus, when taking the history and conducting physical examination in patients in China and treating them according to Chinese medicine, we have to know how these patients express and describe their pain when they go to clinics. This article will explain some terms and words in the Chinese language and their corresponding terms in the English language.

KEY WORDS Chinese medicine, Chinese medicine patterns, pain

Nature of Pain

酸痛 (Suantong): soreness. This is a dull ache that usually occurs in the four limbs or the trunk. It is usually due to a deficiency condition, but may be seen after heavy exercises and sometimes in toothache and tiredness of the eyes.

酸困 (Suankun): it means soreness and heaviness in the limbs or the trunk, but without pain.

闷痛 (Mentong): muffled or suffocating pain. It happens in the chest and, in CM's opinion, it is due to qi stagnation.

重痛 (Zhongtong): pain with a sensation of heaviness. This is also a dull ache but accompanied by a sensation of heaviness: This usually occurs in the limbs, head or the whole body. It is typical of dampness or phlegm. This CM word 重痛 (Zhongtong) is seldom used by people. They usually use two words, "困重 (kunzhong)" meaning heavy, weighty and tired-out and exhaustion, and "疼痛 (tengtong)" meaning pain, so zhongtong means heavy pain.

胀痛 (Zhangtong) 肿痛 (Zhongtong): distending pain. 胀 (zhang) means distending and "zhangtong" is a pain accompanied by a sensation of distension (bloating) synonymous with 膨胀 (pengzhang). Patients in China often actually say they have a "zhangtong", i.e. a distending pain. No patients in the west will ever use this actual expression, but this type of pain is very common in patients in the west. They usually say that they have a pain with "bloating". Very often they will not mention the bloating unless asked. It is therefore very important to

elicit the exact symptoms and characteristics of pain with a proper interrogation. A distending pain is typical of qi stagnation, especially of the Gan (肝). However, it should be noted that other organs may suffer from qi stagnation, too, notably the Wei (胃), and Fei (肺). "Distension" is both a symptom and a sign, i.e. it indicates the subjective bloating sensation of the patient, but the bloating may also be felt on palpation when distention is felt like a drum in that region (this is more easily felt in the epigastrium or the lower abdomen). In gynecology, a distending pain may be seen in dysmenorrhea from Gan-qi stagnation or pre-menstrual breast pain and distension also from Gan-qi stagnation. Pain with distension is usually of full nature. 胀痛 (Zhangtong) sometimes means feeling of fullness in the epigastrium after a heavy meal with nausea. The region is felt hard in palpation and it cannot be seen. With distention, the patient feels bloated like a drum and the region feels like a drum on palpation. Typically pain with a sensation of fullness indicates retention of food and it is related to the Wei and Pi (脾). 胀痛 (Zhangtong) sometimes means a sharp pain accompanied by a sensation as if the skin is being pulled and this kind of feeling is only expressed by a kind of headache due to Gan-wind and is full in nature (although Gan-wind itself may derive from blood or yin deficiency). 痞气痛 (Shanqitong): colicky pain. This is a sharp pain of the colicky, spastic, cramping nature: it occurs in the epigastrium or, more usually, lower abdomen. This pain usually indicates cold in the intestines, but it may also be

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due to blood stasis. In gynecology, this pain is seen in dysmenorrhea due to cold in the uterus. Colicky pain is of the full nature. Patients in China always use 绞痛 (Jiaotong), which is a common word instead of 疝气痛 (Shanqitong).

掣痛 (Chetong), 跳痛 (Tiaotong): spastic pain.

This is a sharp pain accompanied by a sensation of spasm: it usually occurs in the limbs and is related to the sinews and muscles and therefore, related to the Gan. It may be due to Gan-blood deficiency in combination with Gan-qi stagnation or Gan-yang rising. In the latter instance, it may also occur in the head. Spastic pain is either of the full nature or a combination of deficiency (of Gan-blood) and fullness (stagnation of qi). 掣痛 (Chetong) is a CM word but people say it as 跳痛 (Tiaotong) which means contraction plus pain and 瞤动 (Shundong). 瘛疒 (Jingluan) means contraction.

隐痛 (Yintong), 悸痛 (Jitong): pain with a distressing feeling. 悸痛 (Jitong) indicates a pain or ache, usually in the epigastrium or the chest, accompanied by a restlessness and perhaps palpitations. It is usually due to the retention of phlegm in the epigastrium affecting the Xin (心). It is also a typical symptom of rebellious qi in the penetrating vessels. This type of pain is usually due to a combination of deficiency of the Gan, Pi or Shen (肾) and fullness (rebellious qi). 隐痛 (Yintong) (vague pain) means light pain with distress feeling, which may be described in hypomenorrhea or sometimes in stomach pain due to hunger. This kind of pain may be seen in menopausal syndrome. 悸痛 (Jitong) describes distress feeling in Xin with restlessness and anxiety.

闷痛 (Mentong): pain with a sensation of stuffiness. This is usually a dull ache accompanied by a feeling of "stuffiness". It usually occurs in the epigastrium or chest. "Stuffiness" may be defined as a mild feeling of fullness with an important objective difference on palpation: fullness may be felt on palpation as hardness, while stuffiness of the epigastrium is soft on palpation. A feeling of ache and stuffiness is usually due to a combination of deficiency (of the Pi) and fullness (phlegm).

刀割样痛 (Daogeyangtong) or 切割痛 (Qiegetong): cutting or knife-like pain. This is a very sharp pain that feels like a knife cutting. It usually occurs in the lower abdomen and is due to blood stasis and usually described for the uterus or stomach pain. It is definitely full in nature. In case of blood stasis in the head and other places, it is described as 刺痛 (Citong) which means stabbing pain. 跳痛 (Tiaotong): throbbing or jumping or beating pain.

This pain is usually severe and the patient feels throbbing or pulsation. It usually occurs on the head due to Gan-yang rising (migraine). It is of the full nature (although Gan-yang may rise from blood or yin deficiency).

钻顶样痛 (Zuandingyangtong), 钻心痛 (Zuanxingtong): boring pain. This is a severe pain that feels like the point of a knife, a nail or a screw: it is fixed in its location. It is due to blood stasis and full in nature. It may occur in the lower abdomen, epigastrium, hypochondrium, chest or head. In gynecology, it is seen in dysmenorrhea due to blood stasis.

压痛 (Yatong), 压榨样痛 (Yazhayangtong): squeezing/pressing/ cramping/tenderness. This kind of pain is exaggerated by pressing and may be found everywhere. It is usually due to blood and qi stagnation and full in nature.

紧缩样痛 (Jinsuoyangtong): tightening pain. In this kind of pain, the patient feels a tightening or compressing pain. It is full and seen in the head due to Gan-wind or wind-cold attack (like 压榨样痛 Yazhayangtong).

锐痛 (Ruitong): sharp pain. This kind of pain is severe and full in nature and is usually due to blood stasis and may be described for headache, stomachache and uterine pain.

灼痛 (Zhuotong): burning, hot, scalding, searing. This kind of pain is usually described for some kind of stomach or epigastric pain in which the patient has pain with burning sensation. It is usually due to excess of heat.

钝痛 (Duntong): vague or dull pain. This kind of pain usually is not severe or sharp and seen in deficient conditions like deficient cold or blood and qi deficiency. It may be described in the head, abdomen and extremities.

麻刺样痛 (Maciyangtong): numbness pain. This kind of pain is usually seen in blood deficiency and described in the head and extremities.

空痛 (Kongtong): empty or hollow pain. This kind of pain is usually due to deficiency in the blood and qi. It is usually described for some kind of headache and the patient feels that his head is empty and light.

冷痛 (Lengtong): cold pain. This kind of pain is due to cold stagnation and is usually deficient in nature and the patient has pain with cold sensation. Rheumatic pain occurs in the cold or damp weather. Sometimes it is described as very sharp and exaggerated by cold and can be alleviated by warm. It may be seen everywhere.

涩痛 (Setong): rough or unsmooth pain. This kind of pain is severe and harsh and deficient in nature. It is usually due to qi, blood and cold stagnation and described for some kind of abdominal and extremity pain.

强痛 (Qiangtong): stiff pain. It is usually due to cold stagnation and fullness in nature.

反跳痛 (Fantiaotong): rebound tenderness. There is no such word in CM and it is a Western medicine word.

剧痛 (Jutong): throbbing/smarting. This kind of pain is an empty pain and may be felt both in organic and psychological diseases.

阵痛 (Zhentong): recurrent pain (like labor pain)

牵扯痛 (Qianchetong)

牵拉样痛 (Qianlayangtong)

牵涉痛 (Qianshetong): referred pain

痛苦 (Tongku): distress

Time of Pain

Daytime pain is usually due to a dysfunction of qi or blood. Pain at night is due to a dysfunction of yin or blood stasis. Intermittent pain is due to either qi deficiency or qi stagnation.

Continuous Pain Is Usually Due to Blood Stasis.

Pain after eating indicates a full condition (which may be stagnation of qi, retention of food or blood stasis); also, cold in Wei can cause this kind of pain. Pain before eating may indicate a deficiency of the Wei and Pi.

Pain after defecation is due to a deficiency, usually of the Pi.

Pain before defecation and alleviated after it indicates a full condition, usually retention of food.

Region of Pain

Localized pain is usually due to phlegm or blood stasis. Moving pain is usually due to qi stagnation (unless it is due to wind in the joints).

Response of Pain to Pressure and Temperature

Aggravated by pressure: this indicates a full condition (which may be dampness, phlegm, qi stagnation, blood stasis or retention of food).

Ameliorated by pressure: this indicates a deficiency condition.

Alleviated by warmth: if a pain is alleviated by the application of heat (such as a hot-water bottle), it indicates that it is due to cold or yang deficiency.

Similarly, the pain is aggravated by cold.

Alleviated by cold: If a pain is alleviated by cold (which could be the application of cold, or the consumption of cold food), it indicates it is due to heat.

Zangfu versus Channel Pain

Besides the above differentiation, another important one is that between pain due to the involvement of the Zangfu organs with their respective channels and that due to the involvement of the channels only. Most pains resulting from sprains, traumas or Bi (痹) syndrome (arthralgia syndrome) (due to wind, cold or dampness) involve the channels only, whereas most other pain involves the Zangfu organs and their respective channels. For example, a shoulder or elbow pain along the large intestine channel usually involves the channel only and does not derive from a Zangfu involvement; whereas an abdominal pain deriving from constipation or diarrhea clearly shows the involvement of the large intestine. Of course a channel pain may derive from an internal Zangfu disharmony but it is rare to manifest in the channel only without Zangfu symptoms. An important and common exception to this is an acute disease from the invasion of exterior pathogenic factors at the beginning stage. In such cases, the channels only are involved and they may also cause symptoms resembling an involvement of a Zangfu organ. For example, the cough deriving from an invasion of wind-heat at the Wei (卫) portion of the Fei in its very beginning is due to a Fei-channel involvement and does not derive from a Fei-organ affliction. Thus, the two most important diagnostic factors when confronted with pain are: (1) whether the pain derives from a deficiency or a fullness; (2) whether the pain involves the Zangfu and channels or the channels only.

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