Alice Down the Rabbit Hole

February 12, 2011 By Mike Barr

After a three year hiatus from POZ magazine, I find it an honor and a pleasure to return with this blog--even though I am not the blogging type. I have only a vague idea of what Gawker or TMZ are, and have only just now (to create the link) actually visited either site. I own neither an iPhone or an iPad, and while I am thrilled to see oppressive governments in Tunisia and Egypt fall, I otherwise can't help thinking that Twitter (not to mention Manhunt and its ilk) have more or less polished off the last remaining remnants of person to person interaction--a phenomenon I both suffer from and bemoan almost daily. If I were to read a blog, it would probably be The Huffington Post, Andrew Sullivan, Slate, or Salon dot com. But then this probably only betrays how irretrievably mired in the past I am. How unhip.

I keep wanting to remove myFacebook profile entirely but then realize that it is an admittedly time effective way to keep up with friends' goings on--even if mostly with friends (or high school and university peers) you wouldn't particularly care to keep up with anyway! Perhaps not a totalLuddite, I do feel more comfortable in the pre-internet age, the slowness and deliberateness of printed media. And the anticipation of what is to come.

My disillusionment with the direction of HIV research and, well yes, activism and advocacy, slowly snuffed out, from about 2002 to 2008, whatever fire of expectation even hope I had for fewer drugs and maybe even a cure. The people who seemed the smartest and most mindful of the interests of patients and well-being were the ones, at least from my perspective, who found themselves wholly without a platform from which to speak--marginalized if not silenced by the group think single mindedness of academic doctors for hire and for-profit medical (and patient) education.

And so I find myself seeking refuge in the world of Oriental medicine. It's very un-P.C. to call it that, I realize; Traditional Chinese Medicine is the preferred moniker but manages to raise the shackles of the Koreans and Japanese if not the Tibetans, Taiwanese and who knows else. So I still haven't found the all encompassing, non-offensive label for what might also be referred to, without the vestiges of colonialist ambitions, Asian medicine. Call it what you like.

I am now nearly eighteen months into my immersion in this medicine. Like many before me, I was initially attracted by the acupuncture and have since been won over by the power, complexity and possibility for individualization of the herbal formulas. Recently after arriving in California, I learned of a friend, HIV positive for many years, who had indefinitely delayed initiating antiretroviral therapy via regular weekly and biweekly visits to his L.Ac. in Santa Monica. Then

after my first six months or so of the (four year) program here in Los Angeles' Koreatown, I learned that two of the herbs in a common formula for the moodiness and irritability associated with P.M.S. (Xiao Yao San) had an effect against Human Papilloma Virus. Then just a few weeks ago, a professor in one of my formulas classes mentioned that a common qi tonic, Si Jun Zi Tang, the so called "Four Gentlemen's Decoction," produced (CD4) T-cell rises in his HIV positive patients--and that apparently there is research to document this effect of the formula but none that I have yet been able to find. Where was this information, I wondered, when another friend and I (and his super smart MD) watched on in dismay as his Truvada-Kaletra therapy brought his viral load to virtually nothing within a couple of months but his T-cells struggled to pull themselves out of PCP prophylaxis range for all of two years? Might this Traditional Chinese Medicine formula--from a book (Tai Ping Sheng Hui Fang or The Great Peace Sagacious Benevolence Formulary) of over 16,000 Chinese herbal formulas written over 1,000 years ago--have solved (or even helped) the gut-wrenching phenomenon of the so called immunological non-responder or viral disconnect? Now I want to know.

Yet another classic TCM formula, Gui Pi Tang ("Restore the Spleen Decoction"), commonly used to treat certain patterns of insomnia and feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed out from life or work, because it is essentially Si Jun Zi Tang with some additional herbs added to address over worrying and anxiety, might presumably (if the T-cell boost claim of "Four Gentlemen" is real) help boost T-cell counts and help one sleep more soundly at night--and to cope with the world during the day! While I am not suggesting that the ARVs could be put back in the medicine cabinet, the Lexapro (or Cymbalta), Xanax (or Klonapin) and Ambien (or Lunesta) might be! So much to follow up on.

But as I dig deeper into my studies I find, at least so far, a real dearth of research into, well, anything generally but more specifically anything along the lines of sexual wellness: HIV, hepatitis, herpes, HPV. I am hoping I just haven't looked in the right places yet, and in many ways this latent hope is what prompted me to suggest this blog to the editors and publishers of POZ. Short of Ruth (aka Misha) Cohen's Quan Yin Healing Arts Center and an HCV research paper here or there, there really doesn't seem to be much going on (or even interest?) in the exploration of these herbal medicines for the treatment of these viral infections. If anyone even finds his or her way to this blog, please take a moment to tell me how wrong I am and who's doing (or has done) what and where I can find it! In the meantime, I will follow up on the tidbits I mentioned above--and see what else of interest to POZ readers I can find. Thanks for having me.

Mike Barr is a board certified acupuncturist and herbalist and can be reached at Turning Point Acupuncture (just off Columbus Circle across from the Mandarin Oriental hotel) and at Suite 904 in the Flatiron District. His interests and experience include sports acupuncture, pain syndromes, liver health, immunological support, herbal and acupuncture approaches to getting off/putting off prescription medications of unsatisfactory or unclear benefit, and in helping to manage the side-effects of other necessary and life-saving biomedical interventions. He has also been busy exploring the application of Chinese herbal therapies, and specific acupuncture protocols, for all aspects of sexual health and anti-senescence.

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