

Student

Azusa Hirota

S401. TCM Classics

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Bloodletting, historical experiences

The Bloodletting is the oldest medical technique. The Definition of Bloodletting (or blood-letting) is the withdrawal of blood from a patient to prevent or cure illness and disease by physician or by leeches in general term. Bloodletting is the classical base of both ancient Western Medicine and ancient Chinese Medicine. Unfortunately, it has lost its wider scope of use now, with both patient and practitioner. There are two main reasons. One is being afraid of the sight of blood, how to deal with it in clinical practice. (1) Other is the bloodletting is said "no science evidence". However, it is still commonly indicated for a wide variety of conditions in the Ayurvedic, Unani(Perso-Arabic traditional medicine), and TCM of alternative medicine. Unani is based on a form of humoral imbalance.

The history of bloodletting is since Ancient Egypt, around 1000BC. It has been reported to contain bloodletting instruments in Papyrus. Egyptians based the idea on their observations of the Hippopotamus, confusing its red sweat with blood, and believing that it scratched itself to relieve distress. During the Roman Empire, the Greek physician Galen, who subscribed to the teachings of Hippocrates, advocated physician-initiated bloodletting. There were two key concepts in his system of bloodletting. The first was resolving blood stagnation in the extremities. The second was regulating "Body fluids" balance, four humoral being blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, relating to the four Greek classical elements of air, water, earth, and fire respectively. He believed that blood was the dominant body fluids and the one in most need of control.

In 1162, the bloodletting was banned by Pope of Roma, it was carried out by barbers. This led to the distinction between physicians and surgeons. The red-and-white-striped pole of the barbershop, still in use today.

In 19th century, the bloodletting was used primarily medicine. Leeches became especially popular in the early nineteenth century. Bloodletting was also popular in the young United States of America. In this time, doctors practiced "only" bloodletting for every symptom. In the report of this century, practitioner let patients bleed out 300ml to 600ml at one treatment, total over 1 liter of blood, sometimes over 4 liters. In current science 50% of blood loss causes death, it is around 4 to 5.7 liters. In addition, it was not enough hygiene management, many people were killed, for instance Ada Lovelace, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and George Washington.

"Bloodletting is now a laughable proposition to most in the 21st century, yet its origins were based on similar principles of "doing what we've always done," bolstered by success in some cases, while somehow rationalizing, or even worse, ignoring those cases where it had failed." (2)

In modern medicine, Bloodletting is used for Hyperemia, Hepatitis C, Hemochromatosis and treatment after joint surgery, it is used 14 gauge injection needle and pulling out blood. The medical leech is permitted at FDA (Food and Drug Administration) in 2004, in America.

In TCM, letting out blood is among the oldest of acupuncture techniques. The acupuncture started as a method of pricking boils, then expanded to letting out "bad blood" that was generated by injuries or fevers, and allowing invisible evil spirits and perverse wind qi escape from the body. They use thin filiform needles for the purpose of adjusting the flow of qi and blood, without necessarily releasing something from the body.

The techniques are piercing a vein or small artery at the tip of the body-finger tips, toes, or top of the ears that acupuncturists well-known as the acupuncture points. Bloodletting is usually employed in the modern Chinese medical practice for the treatment of febrile diseases and dermatological conditions.

In ancient Chinese text books, Bloodletting was written in The Lingshu (Spiritual Pivot) and the Suwen (Simple Questions), around 100 B.C. In Huang Di Neijing Su Wen, "Generally, when there is stagnation and fullness in the blood vessels, one should first utilize bloodletting to reduce symptoms and suffering."(CH24 page.99) "The qi of the body flows in accordance with the changes of heaven and earth. Therefore, when one administers acupuncture during the spring, it is appropriate to needle shu points. In fact, bloodletting is a preferred technique." (CH16 page. 58-59)(3)

The TCM is experiments based medical philosophy. It is same for the ancient Western, Greek and Egyptian Medicine. The astronomical number of people were helped their conditions from bloodletting medical belief. Through from scientism development in the future, we will know the meaning which the ancient people who are our ancestor had discovered. Bloodletting is the one of interesting researchable topics.

(1) Bloodletting for chronic constipation, Naomi Jankowski, <https://www.thelantern.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Bloodletting-for-constipation.pdf>

(2) Forensic Testimony, Science, Law and Expert Evidence, 2014, Pages 23-39

(3) The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine, : A New Translation of the Neijing Suwen with Commentary, Book by Maoshing Ni