

Chinese Cupping Therapy as an Alternative Treatment for Pain Management: A Qualitative Discussion from Chinese Medical Doctors and Professionals

Dos Santos Luis Miguel
Woosong Language Institute, Woosong University, 196-5 Jayang Dong, Dong Gu,
Daejeon, South Korea

Abstract: Chinese Cupping Therapy (CCT) is considered an alternative medicine which is categorized as a pseudoscience. It is an application of ancient medical practices to heal internal medical symptoms. Unlike, the acupuncture technique which required inquiry of the skin, CCT offers safer and effective treatments for particular groups of patients, particularly for older people with diabetes or skin allergies that require special skincare. In order to collect contemporary practices, the researcher collected qualitative data from 25 Chinese medical doctors and professionals about the techniques of CCT and their experience. CCT allows the patient to self-heal their yin-yang balancing, patients with special symptoms to heal their body without inquiry and provide alternative treatments for older people with special conditions. The result of this study responds to the gap of English literature reviews in the field of CCT and the techniques of CCT for special patients. In addition, the personal techniques and applications sharing encourage the readers of this study to improve their techniques for their patients.

Key words: Alternative treatment, Chinese cupping therapy, pain management, traditional Chinese medicine, yin and yang, techniques

INTRODUCTION

Both acute pain and chronic pain are among the typical clinical illnesses seen in the contemporary medical field. Although, physical therapies, occupational therapies and other medical treatments have been used for healing and pain management, a large number of patients continue to suffer pain. In fact, pain itself does not exist alone. Pain usually reflects other illnesses and diseases inside or outside of the human body. Reasonable pain management is encouraged as long as while appropriate treatments are employed (Cao *et al.*, 2014).

In contemporary medicine, Chinese Cupping Therapy (CCT) is considered an alternative medicine which is categorized as a pseudoscience. CCT is a Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) that has been widely used for nearly 3,000 years. It is an application of ancient medical practices to heal internal medical symptoms (Leem, 2014). CCT works by creating negative pressure inside of cupping tools, either by lighting a fire (traditional) or manual suction (modern), placed on the skin of the patient. CCT is a fundamental application which is fast and effective in stimulating muscle pressure, body heat and reducing pain in limbs, head,

neck, truck and back (Mehta and Dhapte, 2015). However, it is worth noting that CCT is not able to heal any injury or pain of the internal organs such as pain experienced due to surgery. Therefore, CCT may not be the most appropriate way to address pain in older people and patients with chronic illnesses.

Acupuncture with needling treatments and practices is another means of pain management. Acupuncture is a technique in which medical professionals stimulate particular points on the patient's body most often by inserting needles into the surface of the body. The outcomes of acupuncture show that it can address chronic pain such as pains in the limbs, head, neck, truck and back (Vickers and Linde, 2014). Particularly for older people who may experience chronic pains, acupuncture provides an alternative way to reduce pain but the application of needles into the surface of the body may increase the risk of infections among older people (Vicker *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, CCT does not require injections. Therefore, CCT offers safer and effective treatments for particular groups of patients, particularly for older people with diabetes or skin allergies that require special skincare (Al-Bedah *et al.*, 2016).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to investigate the applications of CCT, particularly for older people, the researcher conducted a qualitative inquiry with a general inductive approach to collect opinions from Chinese medical doctors and professionals with experience in CCT (Tang and dos Santos, 2017). The 25 Chinese medical doctors and professionals (N = 25) in the Province of Guangdong, China with expertise in the field of CCT were invited to participate in five different focus group activities (Merriam, 2009). The participants were divided into groups of five for sharing in each focus group activity. Although, each focus group activity involved Chinese medical doctors and professionals with different levels of experience most of the participants shared similar opinions and themes. All of the focus groups were conducted in Mandarin. After the analysis, the researcher had all the Chinese-language data translated into English for reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings section is divided into three themes with practical applications and examples. As this study intended to capture how CCT improves the health conditions of older people, the interview protocol and focus group questions focused particularly on applications for older people.

The benefits of Chinese cupping therapy: Unlike Western medicine, TCM advocates preventive and self-healing treatment. In other words, before an illness occurs, individuals should prevent its development. After the five focus group activities, the benefits of CCT were categorized into four themes.

First, TCM advocates the balancing of yin and yang to maintain the human body in a healthy condition. Yin refers to the cold elements of the human body and yang refers to the hot elements. If the individual can balance cold and hot elements they can achieve a state of equilibrium in the body. Doctor#8 shared that “Regardless of the different schools within the field of TCM, the Yin-Yang balance is essential”. Doctor#12 echoed this:

The Yin-Yang balance is the fundamental objective of TCM. Older people have always suffered acute and chronic illnesses. CCT applications may serve as pain management tools to increase the positive energy or reduce the symptoms

Several participants shared their CCT practices for pain management. Doctor #15 shared an application to relieve fever patients from pain: “fever is a symptom of excess in the yang element of the body, ..., patients can place their cupping tools on the DaZhui point near the neck to lower heat. “Echoing this, Doctor #13 also shared that “for some illnesses that involve an excessive amount of the yin element, placing the cupping tools at the GuangYuan point helps the patient to regain heat. The yin-yang balance is considered the critical element in TCM and CCT can be useful to balance these elements”.

Second, reconciling the internal organs. The CCT technique employs the negative pressure inside of the cupping tools for the purposes of producing congestion and blood stasis on the surface of the body in order to balance the yin and yang of the internal organs. From the perspective of TCM, all the internal organs are interconnected. Balancing the yin and yang is also considered to create balance in each internal organ, particularly for its positive functioning. Doctor #4 brought a foot massaging diagram for reflexology and shared how CCT may be incorporated into foot massage:

Each part or each point of the foot reflects a part of the body. This includes internal organs. In terms of pain management, Chinese cupping therapists have suggested that if the patient feels pain in one part of the body, ..., for example, the kidney, one can place a cupping tool on the point of the patient’s foot related to the kidney. In fact for older people, we rarely employ cupping tools directly over their kidney or other points on their body. Massaging their foot or applying cupping tools to the foot could be an alternative way to address their pain and other problems for their body and internal organs

Third, dredging the meridian. TCM holds that the human body, particularly the veins are connected by meridians. If one of the meridians is blocked, uncomfortable feelings and pain symptoms may occur. CCT employs heat and negative pressure to stimulate pressure points and meridians on the surface of the body. The acupuncture points of the body and meridians are interconnected. Therefore, Chinese cupping therapists advocate that if medical practitioners stimulate the acupuncture points by using the cupping tools, the meridian can be dredged. Doctor #17 suggested that in the field of Chinese preventive treatments, medical doctors and professionals believe that older people always experience both acute and chronic pains due to blockage of the meridian systems. Therefore, if the energy inside of the meridian systems passes through the veins smoothly, illnesses and diseases are less likely to occur.

Table 1: The meaning of the color of the cupped surface and skin

The color of the cupped surface and skin	Symptoms
Purple and black	Blood stasis Internal injury Excessive working hours Serious injury Hypothermia
Dark red	Excessive working hours Insomnia Fever Joint pain
Light red	Body moisture

Further, Doctor #20 stated that there are 12 meridian systems or channels in the human body: liver, heart, spleen, lung, kidney, gallbladder, small intestine, stomach, large intestine, bladder, pericardium and trifocal. Although, each meridian system involves individual functions, they are all interconnected. All of the participants stated that if any meridian system is blocked, serious illnesses can arise immediately.

Fourth, diagnosing the symptoms. Watching, listening, asking and touching the pulse are four fundamental elements of diagnosis. Although, traditional Chinese medical doctors and professionals are able to diagnose a number of illnesses and symptoms, some are difficult to identify. Therefore, CCT serves as an additional element beyond watching, listening, asking, and touching. Doctor #11 said, “CCT allows us to look at the skin color and skin conditions in order to better identify the symptoms”.

As mentioned above, CCT tends to stimulate the surface of the body with cupping tools. The colors of the cupped surface and skin also reflect the condition of the body. Doctor #3 summarized these as shown in Table 1. Doctor #4 also stated that the color of the cupped surface and skin reflected the health of the patient:

For symptoms such as a pulled muscle or back pain, a prescription of both TCM and Western medicine may not be useful. Traditionally, Chinese patients tend to look for physical therapies, massage, Chinese tui-na and Chinese cupping therapies for pain management. It is known that the color of the cupped area relates to the condition of the body. The color of the skin serves as an additional element for us to diagnose the symptoms, ..., besides watching, listening, asking and touching.

Duration of Chinese cupping therapy for older people:

For both well-being and medical purposes, the duration of each CCT section should not exceed 15 min. CCT for older people must pay particular attention and special care in order to prevent discomfort. Several participants expressed their experience of treatments for older people. Doctor#4 suggested that “many older people do not understand, ..., that excessively long CCT may reduce the effectiveness of the treatment”. Doctor#9 also said that “for young people, 20 min. of CCT could be appropriate.

It is important for older people who practice CCT at home without medical professionals to be aware of the appropriate duration, ..., exceeding the 15 min. safe zone could be very dangerous”. Doctor #17 further explained, the problems from his own experience:

Stimulating the surface and skin is the key for CCT, ..., Some older people may have an illness which they are not aware of, ..., One of the side effects of CCT is to drain the energy of the human body, ..., it is hard for older people to regain their energy after the therapy, ..., if their energy is low or lost it absolutely hurts their overall health. Doctor #16 also said that energy is a fundamental element of balance, particularly for well-being during late adulthood: when older people use CCT, ..., it is essential to do so, for a short duration and to use less pressure with the cupping tools, ..., older people should not conduct these therapies by themselves

Some other participants stated that CCT for older people should not exceed five minutes. Doctor #9 suggested that duration is not a significant element, that the effect of the treatment is the most important:

It does not matter whether it is 5 or 20 min., ..., as long as the cupping treatment is conducted correctly, the patient can gain positive outcomes. Therefore, in my experience and in my clinics, ..., the duration, ..., is highly dependent on the actual symptoms and situation of each patient, ..., for older people, regardless of their body condition and symptoms, we always control the time, ..., it should be <5 min. CCT is not the only treatment, ..., there are also massage, Chinese tui-na and even herbal treatments

Prohibition of Chinese cupping therapy for older people with chronic illnesses:

The negative pressure inside of the cupping tools can stimulate illnesses and have side effects. Many participants said that CCT may hurt the energy of older people. As energy is the fundamental element in balancing the life force in the human body, Chinese cupping therapists pay special attention when administering these treatments to older people.

Besides the consideration of older people’s energy, several participants said that older people’s bodies are weaker than those of young people. Doctor #6 shared that “CCT may have the potential to exacerbate some diseases suffered by older people, including diabetes, osteoporosis, anesthesia, stroke and apoplexy: diabetes patients always need special care for their skin, ..., if the cupping tools cause minor wounds and openings on their skin which are too small to observe with the naked eye, ..., it can be a severe problem”.

Several participants believed that the yin-yang balance of older people could be interrupted by CCT. Doctor #15 said that a large number of Chinese cupping treatments tend to reduce the yang element as well as body heat. As the circulation of energy and blood in older people is weaker than in young people and middle-aged adults, the draining of energy by Chinese cupping treatments could result in the occurrence and development of disease.

CONCLUSION

In the current literature, there are a large number of contemporary literature reviews, textbooks and articles concerning CCT techniques and methodologies. However, most of the articles focus on how CCT heals a particular illness or disease and the combination of other TCM treatments with CCT. Qualitative research with a focus on older people and the application(s) of CCT is lacking in the current database, particularly in the English-language database. In this study, focus group activities collected the clinical experiences, lived stories and the sharing of doctor's experience regarding CCT. The results indicate that CCT is a useful technique to use alongside acupuncture as an alternative medical treatment. CCT allows the patient to self-heal their yin-yang balancing, patients with special symptoms to heal their body without inquiry and provide alternative treatments for older people with special conditions. The result of this study responds to the gap of English literature reviews in the field of CCT and the techniques of CCT for special patients. In addition, the personal techniques and applications sharing encourage the readers of this article to improve their techniques for their patients.

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