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Medical Practice in China: A Compendium

Nongcun yisheng shouce (Peasant Village Physician's Handbook). Compiled by the Medical Revolutionary Committee of Hunan. People's Hygiene Press, Peking, ed. 4, 1971. 1200 pp. Soft plastic cover.

The consequences of the Chinese Cultural Revolution ramify over vast areas of Chinese thought. Medical practice, research, and education have undergone great changes. In place of the priority formerly given to sophisticated and centralized care, large cadres of what we would call paramedical personnel have been educated to offer public health services and basic therapy to the rural majority of the population. Whether "barefoot doctors" with only half a year of formal medical training can competently discharge their responsibilities for hygienic education, low-level treatment, and referral to higher facilities has been the object of much speculation.

The present book, of which copies are on sale at exhibitions of Chinese products in Japan, is of extraordinary interest. Said to be printed in over a million copies, it is intended for general use in the Chinese countryside, to be studied as a textbook by all those having to deal with health- and sick-care and used as a handbook by doctors with more extensive theoretical training. The picture it gives of treatment methods in common (or recommended) use shows that modern Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine have to an astoundingly high degree been synthesized into a kind of eclectic medicine since the last prejudices against the native medical tradition were eliminated in the Cultural Revolution.

Citations of Chairman Mao, of course ubiquitous, appear not only in the headings of different chapters but also in discussions of particular problems. They are especially prominent in the discussions of matters on which public health policy has focused popular attention—general hygiene, harmful in-

sects, schistosomiasis, venereal diseases—and of disorders for which new treatment methods recently have been introduced, such as deaf-mutism.

The book covers a vast range of subjects from protection against nuclear and biological warfare (43 pages) to ear acupuncture (which involves a choice among nearly 100 points on the ear to affect various parts of the body). The first chapter is entitled "Extinguish the four pests," these being rats, flies, mosquitoes, and bedbugs. Poisons for these four, as well as for cockroaches, fleas, and lice, are described in detail. Descriptions of secure latrine constructions follow, and attention is paid to sanitation and water and food hygiene, as well as to labor hygiene. Special stress is put on the prevention of epidemic disease.

Ten pages of basic statistical methods with stress on error analysis are of utmost interest, in view of the notorious disregard of statistical methods in traditional medical thought. In exercises the reader is informed (whether accurately or not I cannot tell) that in "a certain commune" the incidence of splenomegaly among the population between 1951 and 1957 decreased from 42.1 to 1.7 percent, and further, that of 1655 deaf-mute patients subjected to the new intensive acupuncture treatment 176 gained "normal hearing," 396 made "definite improvements," 923 experienced "improvements," and 160 showed "no result." The causes of noncongenital deafness are said to have been "infection" in 16.9 percent of patients, otitis media in 12.4 percent, meningitis in 6.5 percent, streptomycin nerve damage in 0.9 percent, "high fever" and "pulling wind" (two traditional terms hard to correlate with Western terminology) in 27.8 percent, and "other causes" in 35.5 percent. Which type of deafness is best affected by the treatment is not noted.

Traditional Chinese medicine comprises an independent nosology, diag-

nostics, pharmacology, and stimulation treatment (the last including acupuncture, moxibustion, and massage). Classical diagnostic methods such as pulse palpation and tongue inspection are described in a separate chapter into which modern conceptions do not enter. Paradoxically, traditional methods are not used in the ensuing reviews of specific diseases, where the disorders are classified, named with a terminology purely Chinese in formation but modern in character, and diagnosed by methods familiar to Western doctors. Not until the treatment sections are the "Western" diseases subclassified in a classic terminology. Herbal treatment is given following analysis of the modern disease entity in classical terms. Traditional drug therapy for, say, rheumatoid arthritis follows three main lines depending upon whether this disease is "cold," "damp warm," or "blood empty" (literal but admittedly unfair translations of highly technical designations). The procedures for taking the patient's history, as well as describing symptoms, and making physical examination and differential diagnosis are throughout in accordance with the Western pattern.

Bronchial asthma can be taken as an example. Diagnosis is completely Western. The first treatment is needling of up to five specified acupuncture points. In case of negative results prescriptions of ephedrine, aminophylline, isoprenaline, and adrenaline are recommended. This failing, two complicated herbal medicines are suggested. The choice between them is decided under guidance of the impression of the radial pulses, the pulse frequency, and the condition of the expectorate and the tongue. In the most severe cases corticosteroids are given intravenously, as well as licorice and potassium iodide orally.

Diseases treated almost exclusively by traditional methods include acute bronchitis, chronic gastritis, nonspecific urethritis, portal cirrhosis, rheumatoid arthritis, polyneuritis, neuralgia, and paretical conditions. Exclusively Western treatment is given to heart diseases (mainly mechanical diseases and cardiac insufficiency, not angina pectoris), endocrinological disorders, electrolyte disbalances, and many surgical conditions. Most other ailments are given combined treatment. Most interesting are hypertension, ulcer duodeni, appendicitis, cholecystitis, hemorrhoids, malignant tumors, shock (up-to-date fluid therapy including dextrane, and acupuncture), and psychic disturbances.

Mental disorders are dealt with in six pages in the chapter on neurology. Among "Functional disorders of the sense organs" neurasthenia and hysteria are mentioned. Treatment is political guidance, sodium bromide, caffeine, procaine intravenously, Librium, meprobamate, and acupuncture. The psychoses are divided into schizophrenia, reactive psychosis ("reactive depression" and "reactive delusion"), infectious psychosis, and toxic psychosis. Mania is not mentioned. Etiologically, psychoses are said to be due primarily to psychogenic mechanisms. "Biological" theories are connected with the disfavored "expert authorities" who often conceived the sick without regard to society or class. The importance of not regarding any case as incurable is stressed. The treatment of psychoses is not only acupuncture and pharmaceuticals, but also supporting therapy with a political content. In remission the patient is aided to analyze his condition in terms of endogenic and exogenic causes by the use of "the dialectical-materialist philosophy of Mao Tse-tung" so as to change the pathogenetic factors in himself and the situation that led to the psychosis. Accessible common drugs include chlorpromazine, perphenazine, and imipramine. The treatment ideology is flexible enough that agitated schizophrenia is mentioned as a possible indication for hibernation with chlorpromazine, promethazine, and pethidine.

New approaches to medical problems can be seen on almost every page of the book. Sometimes the treatment recommended gives an impression of being out of date. Several diseases considered important outside China are excluded or described only very superficially. Except in the special chapter on statistics, figures on the prevalence and cure rates of diseases are conspicuously absent. Prognoses are never given, but allegedly preventive measures are mentioned for most diseases. However, since the text is not primarily aimed at doctors with an advanced medical education, it seems excellently fitted for its purpose.

Acupuncture is described from a purely practical point of view. Several recently invented or rediscovered methods are described, like needling of the ears and stimulation of the acupuncture points with fluid injections, incisions, subcutaneous threads, electricity, hot suction cups put on the skin, and so on. Moxibustion and classical massage

are described only briefly. The general impression is that the traditional methods are used enthusiastically and in an empirical spirit. At the same time that the authors give high praise to the great medical tradition of the Chinese people, they recommend the conscious transgressing of old rules and tabus in finding more effective acupuncture points and better means of stimulation. Antisepsis is observed—the needles are sterilized by boiling or alcohol prior to insertion in the skin—and in moxibustion only gentle warmth is allowed by the smoldering punk applied on the flesh, so as to prevent scar formation. Surgical acupuncture anesthesia is, strangely enough, not even mentioned. The only thing that can confidently be said about this whole therapeutic system is that it awaits our understanding and that we are likely to experience many surprises along the way.

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