

Using thick needles to treat stubborn cold

by Dr Li Ming-Zhi

I HAVE OFTEN FOUND in my practice that when fine filiform needles fail to achieve the results expected, switching to thicker needles will increase the tonification or reduction effect and cure the problem.

The case of Mr Cai, 38, shows what I mean. He had right knee pain for over a year; with a history of knee sprain, the Western diagnosis was 'traumatic arthritis'. But Western treatment had not worked, herbs also did not help, and his previous acupuncture treatment had proven ineffective.

His tongue was pale, the tongue coat white, the pulse deep and tight – my diagnosis was *han bi*: cold painful obstruction, and my treatment principle called for warmth to move qi and blood, driving out the obstruction and dispersing the cold.

In the beginning I used the standard relatively thin 30-gauge filiform needle at two points on the right leg:

Yang Ling Quan GB 34
Zu San Li St 36

The technique I employed on both points was Burning Mountain (*Shao Shan Huo*), at which the patient felt a mild heat; after this I did warming needle with moxa.

Each time, the patient would feel local relief, but after several hours the pain would return just the same. We gave this approach a fair trial: 16 treatments, but little significant effect.

This was frustrating. As I thought about it, I realised that the situation was one of old stubborn cold lurking in the joint — lightly tonifying and warming just was not going to reach it. We had to use heavy strong heat.

I shifted to a 26-gauge needle, at the same points, and still used Burning Mountain manipulation. This time he felt a toasty heat afterward. Again, we used warming needle with moxa on the needle. This left moxa blisters around the point, due to the thickness of the needle carrying much more heat, and more rapidly.

At the next presentation two days later, the patient reported that his stubborn pain seemed to be gone.

We consolidated our success with three more treatments with the same method, and he was cured. Follow-up two years later found no recurrence.

Historically there have been many discussions of tonification and reduction with acupuncture, most of them involving amplitude of lift and thrust, rotation, angle of the needle, speed of insertion and withdrawal, finger force, and needle retention time. Few, however, pay much attention to the needle thickness factor.

As we can see from the case history above, needle thickness can be crucial in determining suc-

■ Dr Li Ming-Zhi, from Tai county in Jiangsu, published this article originally in *Chang Jiang Yi Hua* (Yangtse River Medical Discourses), Beijing Science and Technology Press, 1996, p. 790.

cess or failure: the same points, the same manipulation, the same technique – the only difference is the thicker needle, and this made all the difference in the ability to shift the long-term stubborn cold that had lodged in the joint.

In herbal formulas, they talk about the importance of dosage. Now, herbs and acupuncture have many significant differences, but I think in this they are similar: not every illness can be shifted with light doses, and not every illness can be treated with thin needles. It is a matter of degree, when tonifying or reducing.

Cool Penetrating the Sky (*Tou Tian Liang*) with a thin needle is an example of light reduction, while with a thick needle is an example of a strong reduction. Burning Mountain (*Shao Shan Huo*) with a thin needle is light tonification, while with a thick needle it is strong tonification.

The needle method of Burning Mountain

Tonifies yang, expels cold – purely tonifying.

Used for all conditions of deficient cold, excess cold (such as stubborn numbness, atrophy, or painful obstruction) and yang qi weak and descending. It is generally used at joints.

It involves a number of techniques also used individually for tonification, such as variable speed of needling, twisting, 'lift and thrust', 'open and closed', and the 'six and nine' methods.

The formal method:

Gently insert the needle to the correct depth (proper location and angle of the needle is assumed) and obtain a qi sensation.

Separate this depth into three sections (in your mind): heaven at the surface, man in the middle, and earth at the depth that you obtained qi.

Withdraw the needle to heaven, the shallowest depth, then within this section of depth you thrust and lift nine times. On the thrust, the needle is tightly grasped, on the lift, the needle is held very lightly and just eased outward.

Then move into 'man', the middle depth section, and repeat the nine times of lifting and thrusting as described.

Finally move into 'earth', the deepest section, and repeat the nine times of lifting and thrusting in the same way. If the patient feels the warmth locally, the needle is then gently withdrawn.

The above is considered one round of Burning Mountain. Several rounds can be done, the requirement being that the patient feels the area has become warm or even hot.

After this the needle can be withdrawn. If nec-

essary, or desired, one can add twisting to the manipulation, particularly the tonifying twisting method that involves rolling the thumb forward on the needle.

The casual method:

Without differentiating depths, or numbers of rotations, after obtaining qi one simply thrusts with a tight grip, then withdraws with a light gentle grip, until the patient feels the local area has become warm.

Endnotes

The directions for Burning Mountain come from the translator's teacher in China, Dr Zhu Ming-Qing. Interestingly, Dr Zhu has noted a similar phenomenon to that discussed in the article, particularly in regard to cold painful obstruction (*han bi*). He said the thicker needles gave much better results. "They yell a bit at the time," he said, "but the next day they feel a whole lot better, and the effects last longer."

