Practical Moxibustion Therapy (7)

Whole body treatment

The first thing that comes to mind when you say whole body treatment for moxibustion is the Taikyoku Therapy of the Sawada style. This is the method using a combination of 11 to 15 standard points and special effect points based on the unique Sawada approach. In this approach moxa is applied on the abdomen and lumbar area and then on the upper back and the upper limbs and finally on the lower limbs. This approach treats all the major joints and major points adjacent to the spine, and covers the whole body in a balanced way. (Fig. 1)

When moxibustion is applied to points located over the whole body in this way, blood circulation over the whole body is rapidly improved, the blood becomes more alkaline, and the innate healing power of the body is increased. Thus, even chronic and intractable conditions that medical doctors have given up on, gradually improve and health is restored amazingly quickly.

This kind of treatment, just as the term whole body treatment implies, uses points all over the body. There is very little hit or miss, and good results are almost certain, no matter who performs the treatment. This is why, in my practice, I often use the Sawada style treatment as a last-ditch strategy for acupuncture and shiatsu patients who show no improvement after many treatments, or patients whose innate healing power is very weak due to extreme depletion.

Hara Moxibustion System

In contrast to the Sawada style point selection and treatment over the whole body, Shimetaro Hara M.D. maintained that it is possible to treat the whole body with a total of just ten points. He asserted that all diseases could be treated with his regimen of ST36 and eight points on the back. In general, I think the effects of moxibustion can be explained in three ways as follows:

1. Changes in the blood chemistry after direct moxibustion
2. Physical effects of the heat
3. The effects of acupuncture points

Be that as it may, Dr. Hara only highlights the changes in the blood chemistry after direct moxibustion. The reason he reduced his treatment points to ST36 and eight points on the back was quite simple. He confirmed through personal experience that the traditional practice of moxibustion on ST36 actually was effective for longevity. In fact, as a result, Dr. Hara lived to the age of 108. As for his choice of back points, Dr. Hara gave the following simple reasons:

1. They are excellent points in terms of anatomy, and are in a suitable location for long term application of moxibustion.
2. Ugly moxa scars are hidden by underwear, so that people won’t notice (the appearance issue).
3. Moxibustion on the low back leaves one with a pleasurable sensation.

Even though his approach may have been somewhat limited and his research was done in the 1920s, Dr. Hara’s research on changes in the blood chemistry with direct moxibustion was a valuable contribution still applicable today. His conclusive findings are part of the explanation of the therapeutic effects of moxibustion, and they are as follows:

1. There is an increase in white blood cells. The white blood cell count begins to increase immediately after moxibustion, and reaches a peak eight hours later. This peak is maintained for 24 hours. The number declines somewhat after three days, but it remains elevated for four to five days after moxibustion. The white blood cell count almost doubles with moxibustion, but when applied continuously for six weeks, the increase is sustained for up to 13 weeks after moxibustion is discontinued.
2. The phagocytic activity of the white blood cells increases. For example, with typhoid bacilli the phagocytic activity increases just 15 minutes after moxibustion. This activity reaches a peak in two to three days, and gradually declines after that. Phagocytic activity is greater than normal for about a week after moxibustion but, when moxibustion is applied continuously, the increase in this activity continues for a longer period.
3. There is an increase in red blood cells and hemoglobin. For subjects who had an average hemoglobin ratio of 78% just before moxibustion, the ratio increased steadily to reach a peak of 90% in eight weeks. Applying moxibustion continuously for 15 weeks, it takes 22 weeks for the red blood cell count to return to what it was before moxibustion.
4. The sedimentation rate of red blood cells increases.
5. Platelet count increases.
6. The speed of blood coagulation increases.
9. Serum complements increase.
10. The capacity to produce antibodies increases.

Dr. Hara claimed that these experimental results were produced by minute amounts of "histotoxin" (denatured
proteins), which stimulated an increase in blood constituents and their activity. Furthermore, he enlisted the concept of homeopathy to explain that, while large amounts of "histotoxin" from big burns are harmful to the body, minute amounts of this substance from the continuous application of moxibustion was actually beneficial and useful for maintaining health.

Moxibustion of ST36

Moxibustion on ST36 has been famous in Japan since the olden days as a regimen for health and longevity. In the Edo period (1596-1868) a farmer by the name of Manpei in the district of Mikawa is said to have lived to the age of 300 by applying moxibustion on ST36 religiously. Manpei was summoned at the age of 196 to be questioned by officials on his secret to longevity. When he was 242 he was invited to the opening of the Eitai Bridge in Edo. In addition to Manpei’s extraordinary longevity, many members of his family lived to an extremely old age. In Japan there is an old saying, “Don’t go on a trip with anyone who doesn’t moxa ST36.” (This came from a time when most travel was by foot.) Dr. Hara is reputed to have said that regular moxibustion on ST36 would “destroy doctors.” His approach involves burning seven rice grain sized cones (about 2.5 mm at the base and 5 mm high) on adults and one to three on little children. If done everyday, this would mean burning more than 5110 cones on both legs in a year. The generation of small amounts of “histotoxin” in this way enhances hematological functions to its highest possible level, and is thus effective in promoting health. The reason Dr. Hara suggests rice grain sized cones is because the combustion temperature of these cones is between 70 and 80 degrees Centigrade, which he considers to be the most effective temperature for the production of “histotoxin.”

Features of the Hara moxibustion system

The features that distinguish the Hara moxibustion system from other approaches are as follows:
1. The amount of treatment (number of points) is less than that in the Sawada style.
2. The intention from the beginning is long term application of moxibustion.
3. The use of acupuncture points is viewed as something to be studied later, when moxibustion on ST36 and the eight points on the back are not effective.

I believe that these features of the Hara system, which make it a very simple approach, are the reasons it has endured so long among the common people of Japan. From time to time I have a patient who tells me “I did moxibustion for one or two years and cured such and such.” I am often surprised when I inspect the moxibustion scars on these people because the scars are often in places that couldn’t possibly be an acupuncture point. Yet it still worked, so it is an undeniable fact that direct moxibustion has an effect no matter where you apply it. This can be explained by the same logic as the generalized effect of foods and medications. It is a result of the effect of direct moxibustion (the influence of denatured proteins) extending to the whole body. This effect prompted Dr. Hara to state, “In direct moxibustion there are no acupoints which exist without the special effect of proteins.” This, of course, refers to the chemical effect of moxibustion on the body, and does not take into account the localized physical change at the sight of stimulation or the acupuncture point. Nevertheless, the systemic effect of moxibustion, which “works no matter where you burn,” is quite impressive and not to be overlooked. This effect makes moxibustion ideal for home therapy and this global effect accounts for its popularity among the common people. And I myself make a practice of applying moxibustion on ST36 everyday along with my wife in the hopes that maybe I can be like Manpei the farmer.

Notes
3. Shimetaro Hara, M.D. was born in 1883. He entered the Kyoto Prefecture Medical Specialty School in 1901 and became a doctor. He began doing research around 1924 at the Public Health Section of the Kyushu University Medical School. Starting with his study of hematological effects after the injection of oxygen, he went on to conduct moxibustion research including, “the hematological effects of moxibustion.” After that, he became a lifelong advocate of moxibustion on ST36 as a method of health promotion and freedom from disease. He practiced this method himself and proved its remarkable effects by living to the age of 108. When he passed away on June 18, 1991, he had been the oldest living Japanese man for two months. (The Japanese have the longest life expectancy in the world.)
4. Hara, Shimetaro, Manbyo-ni-Kiku Okyu Ryoho (Moxibustion Therapy Effective for All Diseases), jistugyo-no-Nippon Sha, 1933, p. 133.