

A GENTLE JAPANESE NEEDLING APPROACH TO TREATING BELL'S Palsy

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Bell's Palsy is a common chief complaint treated in a TCM clinic, and is one where the effectiveness of acupuncture is visibly observed. Where conventional medicine typically expects recovery within six months, my patients usually experience recovery within three weeks. Although I've treated this condition many times over the years, I've seen a recent increase in patients seeking acupuncture immediately upon experiencing facial paralysis as their first and primary form of treatment, likely because of readily available information on the effectiveness of acupuncture for this condition on the internet.

As a practitioner specializing in Japanese acupuncture and gentle needling, what has especially caught my attention with recent patients is complaints of how they previously tried other acupuncturists for the treatment of their condition, but the experience was very painful, aggressive, and often stated that they cried during treatment, specifically when the face was needled. Although many styles can be effective, a patient may not want to continue treatment with a practitioner if the experience was far from enjoyable. With a condition like Bell's Palsy that requires multiple treatments for optimal success, your patient should feel comfortable and willing to return multiple times consecutively. If you make them cry, they are not likely to return.

We are commonly taught in school the traditional Chinese approach to this treatment, which is often aggressive with strong stimulation or electro-stimulation acupuncture, but you can obtain the same results and often almost full recovery within three weeks with a very gentle approach that is pleasant for your patient.

Before describing the treatment, needles and point selection, a brief understanding of Bell's Palsy is necessary.

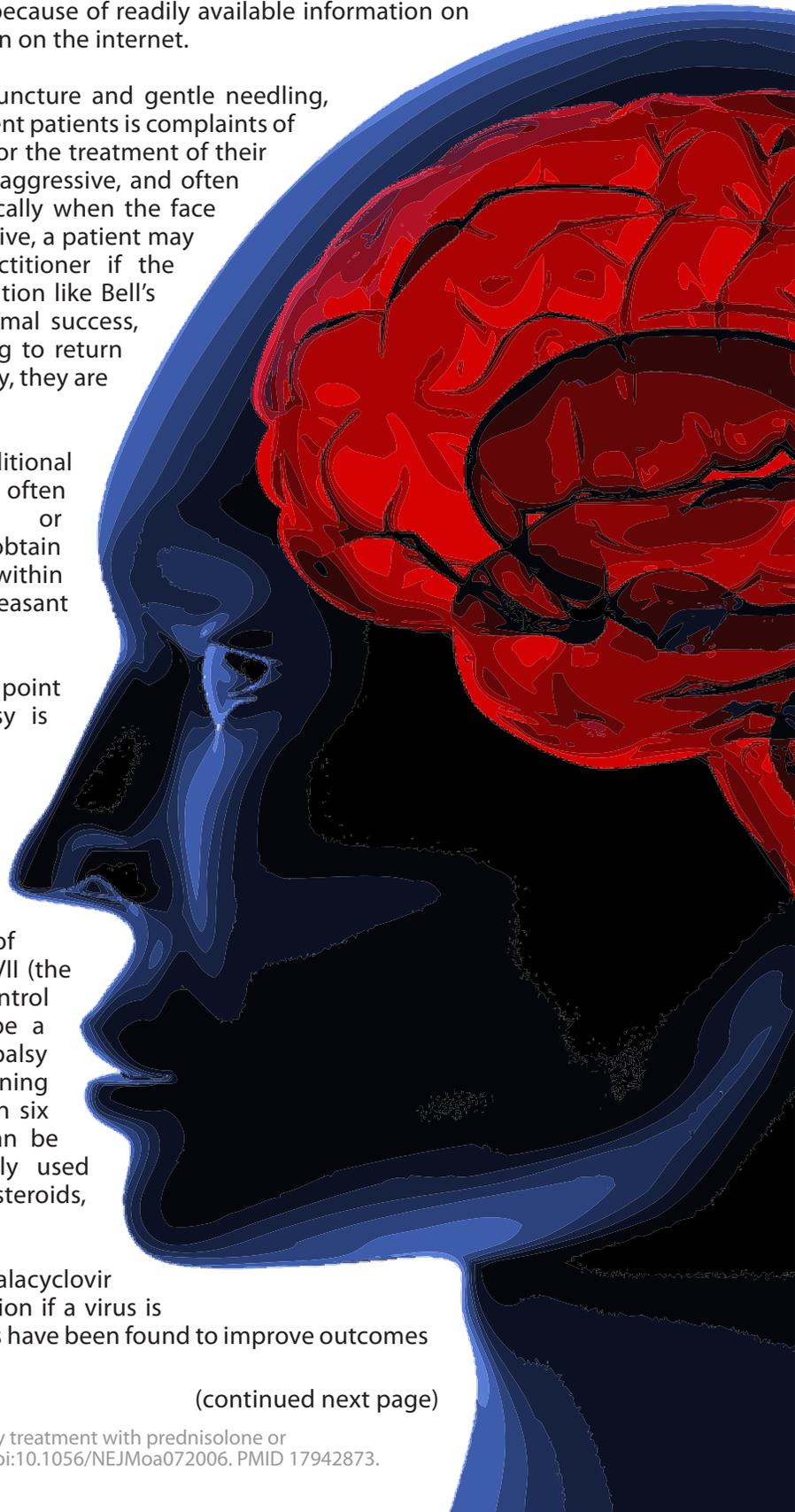
Bell's Palsy: Western vs. Eastern Medicine

Bell's palsy, also known as facial palsy, causes a rapid onset of mild weakness to total paralysis on one side of the face. The exact cause is unknown, but it is believed to be the result of swelling and inflammation of the cranial nerve VII (the facial nerve) that results in the inability to control facial muscles on the affected side. It may be a reaction that occurs after a viral infection. Bell's palsy is typically temporary, with improvement beginning within a few weeks to complete recovery within six months. Occasionally Bell's palsy symptoms can be experienced for life, or can recur. Commonly used medications to treat Bell's palsy include corticosteroids, such as prednisone.

Antiviral drugs, such as acyclovir (Zovirax) or valacyclovir (Valtrex), may stop the progression of the infection if a virus is known to have caused it. However, corticosteroids have been found to improve outcomes while anti-viral drugs have not¹.

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1. Sullivan FM, Swan IR, Donnan PT et al. (October 2007). "Early treatment with prednisolone or acyclovir in Bell's palsy". *N. Engl. J. Med.* 357 (16): 1598-607. doi:10.1056/NEJMoa072006. PMID 17942873.



Chinese medicine attributes the condition mainly to Wind invasion obstructing the collaterals. This disrupts the flow of Qi and Blood, preventing the vessels and muscles from receiving necessary nourishment. This could be Wind-Cold, Wind-Heat, or Wind-Phlegm. Blood stasis obstructing the collaterals is another possible diagnosis. Interestingly, when questioning patients during initial intake the patient usually was exposed to Wind the day before the sudden onset. Common examples are being outside on a windy day such as at the beach, or playing golf with neck exposed and remembering sensitivity to wind, sleeping under a fan or air conditioning vent, or driving in a convertible car.

A Gentle Japanese Approach

For this condition, and most others treated in my clinic, I use shallow Japanese acupuncture insertion for about 15-20 minutes with Seirin J Type (#02) 0.12 x 15mm needles. These are used for local face needling, as well as body points. For moxa, I use high quality loose moxa rolled into cones, or chinetskyu. I also use a Yanagishita Enshin (non-insertion Japanese Meridian Therapy technique) locally on the affected side prior to insertion.

The treatment frequency should ideally be three times per week for the first week, then minimum once per week following depending on results, patient schedule and finances.

I always encourage taking B12 liquid, as this helps to support healthy nerve function, red blood cell formation and helps the nerve and surrounding muscle tissue produce energy and reduce inflammation. If the patient is open to an herbal formula, I recommend Symmetry from Evergreen Herbs.

A Case Study

A 41 year old female patient woke up two days prior to her initial visit with right facial paralysis. Upon initial visit, she appeared to have a House-Brackmann grade 5 paralysis in the right facial muscles. Her sleep, appetite and energy were normal, with a regular menstrual cycle. Only additional symptoms of note were chronic constipation and regular stress and anxiety. She also typically experiences headaches during her menstrual cycle. Her pulse was wiry with a purple tongue. Overall, this patient is in good shape, exercises regularly, has good muscle tone and skin complexion.

Acupuncture Prescription:

LI4 (He gu), Lv3 (Tai chong), Sp6 (San yin jiao), St36 (Zu san li), and St40 (Feng long).

Local points on affected side: UB2 (Zan zhu), GB14 (Yang bai), M-HN-9 (Tai yang), St3 (Ju liao), St4 (Di cang), St5 (Da ying), St6 (Jia che), and GB2 (Ting hui).

Moxa chinetskyu locally on affected side.

Herbal and Supplement Prescription:

B12 liquid, 1-2 dropper full per day, and Symmetry from Evergreen Herbs, 4 capsules TID. These can be reduced or stopped once desired effect is achieved.

Results and Discussion:

This patient was given a total of six treatments. The first three treatments were in the first week, followed by one treatment the second week, and her last two on the third week. This was primarily due to her work schedule and finances. After the third treatment, there was visible improvement in the right eyelid movement and closure, as well as mouth movement. By the sixth treatment at the end of the third week, the patient was about 95 percent recovered, with minimal perceptible symptoms of Bell's Palsy.

The patient experienced almost full recovery within three weeks with six acupuncture treatments, where with conventional medicine complete recovery is typically expected within six months. In this case, she was also able to avoid taking corticosteroids such as prednisone which could cause multiple side effects.

The beauty of TCM is that it is ultimately an art form. Every practitioner develops their own style, and can accomplish the same results in a number of ways. It is important for us to explore the many different styles and approaches to acupuncture and Chinese medicine in order to provide the best healthcare as practitioners for our patients.

About the Author:

Michael Fiorani is a Board Certified Diplomat in Oriental Medicine (Dipl.OM). He is currently a DAOM candidate (Doctor of Acupuncture & Oriental Medicine) at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine specializing in Women's Health and Pain Management, and was mentored by Dr. Cameron Bishop, President of the Toyohari Association of North America. He has two office locations in Hallandale Beach and Plantation, FL. Website: <http://www.ZenAcuMed.com>