

# **Chinese Medicine and Autism**

An Introduction for  
Parents, Teachers and  
Allopathic Physicians

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# **CHINESE MEDICINE AND AUTISM**

Mary Cissy Majebe, O.M.D.

## **Introduction**

The treatment of Autism with Chinese Medicine (CM) first began to interest me in 1993 when a parent brought a three-year-old, non-verbal child into the clinic. I acquired a special interest in the treatment of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders from working with this child.

After realizing there was no English information on Autism in Chinese Medical Journals and little information to be garnered from well-respected professionals in the field of CM, I traveled to China and Korea in 1998. While in Seoul, Korea I observed at the Kyung Hee University Hospital with Professors Jae-Hwan Chung and Doeg Kon Kim. This hospital had the only written literature that I was able to discover concerning the treatment of Autism with Oriental Medicine. Upon leaving Korea I traveled to Beijing, where I observed at the Chinese-Japanese Friendship Hospital. The head of Pediatrics, Dr. Yang Meng Lan, was extremely helpful in sharing her many years of experience and knowledge of Autistic children. Besides using Acupuncture and Herbal Medicine, Massage was an integral part of her treatment plan. I also spent time at Beijing Medical University's Institute of Mental Health, with Dr. Xiaoling Yang, MD, President of the Beijing Autism Society. Dr. Xiaoling Yang's primary focus was on Western medical treatments, but as President of the Beijing Autism Society, she was able to assist in my search for Oriental Medical treatment information. At the Beijing Western District Intelligence Cultivation School and Clinic, I observed a large number of Autistic children who were treated three times weekly with acupuncture in the school setting.

Along with the education I acquired overseas, I continued to build on my knowledge and skills in the treatment of Autism with Chinese Medicine. I have since acquired a much wider understanding of Autism and Chinese Medicine through clinical experience and extensive studies with Jeffery Yuen, an 88<sup>th</sup> generation Taoist Priest who is a master scholar, practitioner and teacher of Chinese Medicine. This paper is intended to introduce the Western Medical community, parents, and persons interested in Autism, to another perspective on Autism.

## HISTORICAL BASIS OF ACUPUNCTURE

In order to grasp the depth of the origins of acupuncture, one must travel back in time to a period in our culture rarely associated with “medicine”. Archaeological finds, circa 1000 BCE, have included acupuncture needles, which were made of slivers of stone or bone. The oldest of Chinese Medicine textbooks, the Neijing, (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic), was written in the form of a dialogue between a legendary ruler named the Yellow Emperor and his Minister Chibo. The first part of the book was entitled “Simple Questions” and addressed general theories of Chinese Medicine. The second, called the “Spiritual Axis”, presented more information specific to acupuncture. It not only dealt with the prevention and treatment of illness, but also explained the diagnostic tools used at the time. The Neijing was written over several centuries by a number of different authors and was completed by the first century AD.

Chinese Medicine is a comprehensive health care system that has its own system of diagnostics.<sup>1</sup> It includes not only acupuncture, but also herbal medicine, nutritional therapies, Tui Na (massage techniques), aromatherapy, spinal manipulations and lifestyle counseling. CM allows the practitioner to utilize different combinations of techniques, based on the constitution and specific needs of the individual. Acupuncture alone can not offer the synergistic benefits that are derived from combining the various treatment modalities.

The National Institute of Health met November 3rd -5th, 1997 and authored a consensus statement regarding the medical value of acupuncture treatment.<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup> Maciocia, Giovanni, The Foundations of Chinese Medicine, A Comprehensive Text for acupuncturists & Herbalists, (1989), NY

<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Health Consensus Statement, Volume 15, Number 5, Nov. 3-5, (1997).

conference brought together many national and international experts in the fields of acupuncture, pain management, psychology, psychiatry, physical medicine, rehabilitation, drug abuse, pulmonology, epidemiology, statistics, physiology and biophysics, as well as public representatives. The committee of experts cited clear evidence that acupuncture effectively treats post-operative and chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, as well as post-operative dental pain. The consensus statement indicates that acupuncture could be used as an adjunct treatment, as an alternative treatment, or it could be included in a comprehensive management program for addictions, stroke rehabilitation, headaches, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia, myofascial pain, osteo-arthritis, low back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome and asthma. This consensus statement suggested that further research is likely to uncover other areas where acupuncture interventions would be useful. It is my experience that the treatment of Autism in children is an area where Chinese Medicine is beneficial.

The World Health Organization recognizes Chinese Medicine's ability to treat many common disorders, including disorders of the bones, muscles and joints, respiratory, gastrointestinal, circulatory and urogenital disorders, addictions, eye, ear, nose and throat disorders and emotional and psychological disorders. It is this history of the effectiveness of CM with psychological and neurological disorders that provides a basis for the effective treatment of Autism.

## **CHINESE MEDICINE TERMINOLOGY**

Chinese Medicine pre-dates, by millennia, what is now called “modern” or “western” medicine. Although they share terminology, the two systems have extremely different approaches to the processes of health and healing. Before discussing Chinese Medical treatment of Autism, a rudimentary understanding of the concepts is necessary. Following are some of the basic terms. Some will be unfamiliar and others, although familiar words, must be understood in a different context. For the purposes of this paper, when words are capitalized, (for example: Heart instead of heart), the word is meant to be understood as a concept within Chinese Medicine.

### **JING ESSENCE**

Jing Essence is the substance that is the foundation of the body and the catalyst for bodily processes and functions. It has three components: Pre-natal Essence, Post-natal Essence and Kidney Essence.

Pre-natal Essence is derived from our parents at the time of conception. This Pre-natal Essence nourishes the fetus during pregnancy and determines a child’s basic constitutional make-up. In some ways this Pre-natal Essence is limited in quality and quantity, but it can be positively or negatively influenced by lifestyle choices.

Post-natal Essence is obtained from food, drink and air after birth. The quality of this Post-natal Essence is affected by dietary choices and the maintenance of a healthy digestive system. The strength of the digestive system is crucial for development of Post-natal Essence.

Kidney Essence includes both Pre and Post-natal Essence and plays a critical role in human physiology. Kidney Essence is the basis for growth, development, and reproduction in CM. If Jing Essence is deficient at any level, the development of the central nervous system can be inhibited.

## **BLOOD**

Blood and its functions are another set of concepts that is essential for understanding Autism within a CM framework. This term is not synonymous with blood in Western medical terminology. In Western medicine blood is a purely physical substance, whereas in CM Blood not only involves the cardiovascular system, it involves the Blood's function of nourishing the mind (Shen) and Qi. In Chinese Medicine, Blood is the repository of our social and familial experiences. Heart Blood Imbalances are ever-present factors in Autism. The ability of an Autistic child to relate to others is a function of the health of the Heart Blood.

## **SHEN**

The terms Mind and Spirit are collectively referred to as Shen. Shen reflects the health of Jing Essence, Qi and Blood. The Shen embodies an individual's mental health and well-being. The quality of the Shen is observed in the eyes. Eyes that are bright and clear show a healthy condition of the Shen. Eyes that are dull, as if there is a mist or cloud over them, indicate that the Shen is disturbed. CM assigns the clouded stares or unfocused eyes observed in many Autistic children to Shen disturbance.

## **QI**

Qi (pronounced chee) has been defined in many different ways. It has often been called vital energy or life force. In Western terms it has been analogized with bioelectric energy. Qi is the basic substance that gives the body the power to maintain its vital functioning.

There are five primary functions of Qi. The first is a warming function. The second is to protect the body from external pathogenic factors. This second aspect, called Wei Qi, could be compared to the immune system. The third function of Qi is containment, to hold the organs, vessels, and bodily fluids in their correct places. The fourth function is to transform body substances. For example, Qi helps to convert food and air into energy, blood and body fluids. Finally, Qi is the source of all bodily functions and movement. Many Autistic children have symptomology that is diagnosed as Qi Deficient in CM. A child with Deficient Qi might exhibit shortness of breath and be easily fatigued.

## **MERIDIANS**

Meridians are energetic pathways through which Qi travels, similar to blood vessel networks and nerve networks of the body. Meridians are energetic channels and are not physical structures.

## **CONSTITUTION**

A child's constitution at birth is primarily influenced by three factors. The first is the strength of both parents' Kidney Essence at conception. The second factor is the health of both parents at the time of conception. The third is the mother's health throughout the pregnancy. Genetics is a component of one's constitution, though constitution embodies more than just genetic factors.

## **BODY FLUIDS**

Body fluids originate from the food and drink consumed and are transformed by the digestive system. The digestive system has the function of separating pure and impure food substances. If the digestive system is deficient and is unable to adequately separate the pure from the impure, this may lead to an accumulation of fluids. This fluid accumulation can become congested, at which point it becomes Phlegm. According to CM theory, many of the symptoms associated with Autism relate to Phlegm accumulation.

## **PHLEGM**

Phlegm is characterized as either substantial or insubstantial. Substantial Phlegm is the mucous of bodily discharges. Insubstantial Phlegm is that which is located in the meridians and body tissues and which impairs organ functioning. When Phlegm obstructs the Heart, it is this insubstantial Phlegm that creates mental and emotional illnesses, including Autism. Phlegm is a pathological factor that is always associated with Autism.

## **ZANG FU ORGANS**

In CM, Zang-Fu is a term for the organs of the human body. Many of the organ names are familiar terms. These terms refer not only to a physical organ but to the energetic functions of the organ as well. Each organ relates to an emotional response, sensory organ, and soft tissue. Autistic children often experience difficulties with sensory integration. The three systems of Heart, Spleen and Kidney are associated with speech, the hearing and taste respectively. In the treatment of Autism, the three primary organ systems of concern are the Heart, Spleen, and Kidneys.

### **Heart**

The Heart governs Blood and controls blood vessels. The Heart nourishes and houses the Shen, or Mind. The function of intelligence and memory are attributed to the Heart, rather than to the brain. Heart Blood is the basis for all mental activities. The Heart determines a person's capacity for meaningful emotional relationships.

The emotion associated with the Heart is anxiety. The Heart meridian opens into the tongue and rules over speech, thus abnormalities may cause speech anomalies such as stuttering or aphasia. Heart disharmonies may also cause a person to talk excessively or to laugh inappropriately. The Heart also rules over sweating, and spontaneous or night sweats may occur when there are imbalances. Fatigue and lethargy are also symptoms of Heart Imbalances. The Heart rules over dreams, and disturbance of the Heart can cause sleep difficulties, including nightmares. Heart disharmonies that are seen in Autistic children include Heart Blood Deficiency, Heart Yin Deficiency, and Heart Fire.

### **Spleen**

The Spleen's is responsible for the strength of the digestive process. Its function is to convert food into Qi and Blood. The Spleen also nourishes Heart Blood. The ability to think clearly, concentrate, study and learn is dependent on Spleen Qi. The Spleen is associated with the emotion of pensiveness. The Spleen opens into the mouth and manifests in the lips, with taste being the sensory association. A Spleen disharmony will result in a dull sense of taste and lack of appetite. The Spleen also rules over muscle integrity and the four limbs.

## **Kidney**

The Kidneys store Jing Essence and govern reproduction. The emotion associated with Kidneys is fear. The Kidneys produce marrow, rule over bones and assist in the manufacture of blood. Bone marrow has a role in manufacturing Blood, so Kidney deficiency can lead to Heart Blood deficiency. In addition, the Kidneys govern water and regulate fluid balance in the body. The ears are the sensory organs associated with the Kidneys. The emotion associated with the Kidneys is fear.

## **MENTAL FUNCTIONING: Western and Eastern Approaches**

In Western theory the brain is at the top of the body/mind pyramid. Emotions are processed in the limbic system, and responses generated as nerve impulses travel down the brain stem pathways to the sympathetic or parasympathetic nerves. Nerve impulses triggered by an emotional upset are transmitted to the relevant organ. Traditionally, Western medicine considered the influence of emotions on organs as secondary.

In CM the body and mind are not a pyramid, but a circular feedback loop of interactions among the organs and the central nervous system. CM sees emotions as an inseparable part of the feedback loop.

In CM cognition is primarily ruled by three organ systems. These are the Heart, Spleen, and Kidney. In CM the Heart houses the Mind or Shen. The Heart rules over mental functions, including the emotional state of the individual and short-term memory. The Spleen relates to the mind's ability to study, memorize and concentrate attention. Kidney Qi rules over long- term memory.

## **AUTISM: WESTERN APPROACH**

Autism Spectrum Disorders are developmental disabilities affecting roughly one in five hundred children manifesting with impairment in social interactions and communication. The diagnosis of Autism is based on behaviors. Studies suggest a neurological disorder affecting multiple regions of the brain. There are strong indicators that reflect a genetic basis. While Autistic children often have measurable brain abnormalities, there is no consensus within the medical community regarding the etiology of these abnormalities.

There is growing concern that environmental toxins and pollution may be contributing factors. It is also theorized that nutrition and viral infections may play a role. There is concern that immunizations and antibiotics may be contributing factors.

Although Western Allopathic Medicine cannot effectively treat Autism, educational and behavioral intervention is strongly recommended. There is disagreement within the field of Autism as to the value and effectiveness of particular therapies, but it appears that comprehensive interventions prove the most useful. Some current therapies utilized in treating Autism include: Applied Behavioral Analysis (for example, Lovaas), TEACCH (a behaviorally based classroom model), Speech, Language, Occupational and Physical Therapy. Other treatment modalities include: Sensory and Auditory Integration Training, Vision Training and Dietary Interventions (vitamin/mineral supplementation, allergy elimination techniques, a gluten/casein-free diet, a yeast/mold free diet and digestive enzymes).

## **AUTISM: EASTERN APPROACH**

*“On an emotional level, the state of the Heart determines a persons capacity to form meaningful relationships.”* This quote from The Foundations of Chinese Medicine, by Giovanni Maciocia, is paramount to the understanding of Autism within the framework of CM.

According to Chinese Medical theory, autistic individuals suffer from a Heart imbalance that inhibits connecting on an emotional level with others, including their immediate families. A person with Heart imbalances might manifest a lack of joy in life, anxiety or inappropriate laughter and talking. A person with a Heart Qi disorder could either manifest with excessive talking or aphasia.

Children diagnosed with Autism may present with digestive anomalies that may be deemed irrelevant by Western Medicine Physicians. In CM these children exhibit signs and symptoms associated with Spleen Qi Deficiency. On an emotional level, persons with extreme Spleen Qi imbalances often manifest obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

Autism is usually diagnosed before the age of three. CM sees this disorder as having a Pre-natal origin, compounded by a Post-natal weakness. The Pre-natal component would translate as genetic influence, whereas the Post-natal aspect would relate to all that has occurred since birth. Pre-natal factors in Autism indicate Kidney involvement. Kidney Qi is important for brain development, along with Heart and Spleen, according to Chinese Medical theory.

## **DIAGNOSTICS AND ETIOLOGY**

Chinese Medicine views health as a condition of balance. When conditions arise that create disharmony, disease arises.

Basic methods of diagnosis include observation of the patient, such as listening, smelling, examination by questioning and physical examination by palpation.

Observation includes CM specific skills such as tongue, pulse and facial diagnosis. It also includes close attention to how the patient relates to and moves in the world.

The questioning of the patient is an important diagnostic tool. There are a myriad of questions that are used for gaining information and assisting in diagnosis. Some questions might be considered routine from a Western perspective, such as information regarding the child and their developmental milestones, while others might seem foreign to the person untrained in CM. An example of the latter would be a question regarding sweating, specifically night sweats, spontaneous sweats or sweating of particular areas, for example the palms and soles of the feet. The physical and emotional states of the mother during pregnancy and the health of the parents at conception is also important information.

Pulse analysis is a primary diagnostic tool. The many different pulse qualities that a practitioner is trained to identify enables the practitioner of CM to refine a treatment plan for the individual child, rather than to offer an identical treatment plan for all Autistic children.

Symptoms or behaviors that may be unimportant from a Western viewpoint but are useful in diagnosing and treating Autism within a CM framework include:

- excessive drooling as an infant
- loose stools or constipation
- colic
- easy startle-reflex as an infant
- difficulty with sucking reflex
- desire to eat strange objects, i.e. dirt, etc.
- poor appetite
- sensitivity to food textures or smells
- clouded look over eyes (eyes that seem unfocused)
- laughing with no apparent reason
- recurrent ear, sinus, or upper respiratory infections
- poor eye contact with others
- sleep difficulties as an infant
- sweating anomalies
- tendency to bruise easily
- sensory organ deficits

In CM, imbalances arise from three different sources: external factors, internal factors and miscellaneous factors.

### **External Factors**

Wind, Heat, Fire, Cold, Dryness and Dampness are external pathogenic factors in CM. These factors create imbalances that lead to disease. A child who lives in a house with a mold problem will manifest symptoms that CM associates with Dampness. A Wind Heat Invasion in CM might be classified as a bacterial or viral infection in Western Medicine.

### **Internal Factors**

In CM, Internal Pathological Factors are the Seven Emotions. Emotions are not pathological unless strongly experienced, experienced over a long period of time, or repressed. The seven emotions in CM are: grief, anxiety, joy, anger, fear, over-pensiveness and shock. Each of these emotions is associated with an organ system.

Those that relate to Autism include: fear or shock that weakens the Kidney, over-pensiveness that weakens the Spleen and shock and anxiety that weakens the Heart. The over-pensiveness that is discussed in classical Chinese writings is related to the obsessive behaviors or obsessive thought patterns that often manifest in Autism.

### **Miscellaneous Factors**

Miscellaneous factors include genetic influences, poor nutrition, lack of exercise and excessive mental stimulation, such as an inordinate amount of television viewing. Air pollutants, food additives and preservatives, antibiotics and Immunizations are also considered miscellaneous factors.

### **Genetics**

The diagnosis of Autism at young ages signifies a Pre-Natal connection. The diagnosis of Autism at birth is not possible because there are many co-factors, which must arise for a child to develop Autism. Most children will also be exposed to these same co-factors, yet develop normally. This genetic predisposition must be addressed in order to resolve Autism.

### **Digestive Weakness**

Parents often say that their children seemed normal to about one to one and a half years of age at which time they began regressing. In our culture this is also the time that children begin to consume a much wider variety of foods. If the Spleen Qi is deficient, a person will tend to digest foods poorly and will have a propensity to develop Phlegm. Many of the behaviors associated with Autism are due to Phlegm accumulation. One of the primary pathways for Phlegm development is Deficiency of Spleen Qi.

Diet is of paramount importance in the etiology of Autism. All foods that weaken the Spleen and create Phlegm are implicated in the development of Autism. There is controversy surrounding the link between Autism and diet in the western community, but CM recognizes diet as an important contributory factor.

### **Lifestyle Factors**

Traditionally, babies remained at home with the mother and family in quiet environments. Our culture's propensity to take young infants everywhere, including malls and sports arena is detrimental to their Shen. Babies, particularly those who have a propensity to startle easily, should be kept in quiet, peaceful, soothing environments. It is important that an infant not be over-stimulated, as this depletes Heart Qi and Heart Blood.

### **Emotions**

As Autistic children age, they may exhibit a great deal of frustration. This frustration generates heat and this heat may contribute to more aggressive behaviors. This heat coupled with puberty and its accompanying rise in Yang Qi may lead to seizures. Many autistic children experience anxiety due to Heart Qi and Blood Deficiency. Spleen Qi Deficiency can lead to obsessiveness and this obsessiveness only weakens the Spleen Qi further.

### **Antibiotics**

Antibiotics are extremely cold in nature. The coldness that allows them to be effective over bacterial infections also creates cold in the digestive system, i.e. Spleen. This cold adversely affects the Spleen Qi and promotes the development of phlegm. It is this phlegm component that is paramount to understanding the development and treatment of Autism.

## **Immunizations**

Immunizations are classified as Heat Invasions in CM. Vaccinations introduce Heat directly into the Blood System. In CM theory the Heart Qi is vulnerable to Heat. Children who have constitutional Heart imbalances are at greater risk for side effects from immunizations.

Some parents believe that immunizations are the reason their child developed Autism though western research has not shown a definitive causal link between Autism and immunizations. CM does not see Autism related to a specific cause and effect, but rather as a set of contributing co-factors, which lead to its development. For this reason it is important to address all etiological factors when assessing a child, realizing that it is synergism of these factors which create Autism.

The etiology of Autism with its varied contributory factors explains why CM is able to address the treatment of Autistic children successfully. In CM it is not the disease, but rather the person that is treated.

## **PATHOLOGY**

The primary CM diagnoses that describe Autistic individuals are: Phlegm Misting the Heart and Phlegm Fire Harassing the Heart. Autistic children will manifest varying combinations of imbalances, depending on their constitutions and development. Both of these diagnoses have components of Heart, Spleen, and Kidney imbalances. It is imperative to address all of these energy systems in order to have an effective treatment for Autism.

### **Phlegm Misting the Mind**

A person who manifests this condition will generally appear to be dull witted, with incoherent speech. Symptoms include mental confusion, lethargy, limited attention to one's surroundings and possibly aphasia.

### **Phlegm Fire Harassing the Heart**

A person with Phlegm Fire will exhibit dream disturbed sleep, talking to oneself and tend toward constipation. This person may have episodes of uncontrolled laughing or crying. They are short in temperament, easily agitated, exhibit rash behaviors and tend to aggression.

### **Heart Imbalances**

Heart Disharmonies in Autism include Heart Blood Deficiency, Heart Yin Deficiency and Heart Fire.

### **Heart Blood Deficiency**

An infant with Heart Blood Deficiency has a propensity to startle easily. Signs of Heart Blood Deficiency include a pale complexion, pale tongue, insomnia, dream disturbed sleep, a propensity to anxiety and emotional difficulties. An Autistic child with Heart Blood Deficiency will tend toward lethargy and quietness.

### **Heart Yin Deficiency**

Symptoms of Heart Yin Deficiency include more heat signs. This child will manifest with rosy cheeks and may experience night sweats and sweating of the palms and soles of feet. They may easily develop mouth ulcers with a white rim around the ulcer. A child with Heart Yin Deficiency will tend to be more restless or fidgety than the child with Heart Blood Deficiency.

### **Heart Fire**

The child with Heart Fire will be extremely agitated. Mouth or tongue ulcers will have a red rim. This ruddy child will often have a very rosy face, whereas the Heart Yin Deficiency child only exhibits red cheeks. These Autistic children will manifest more manic behaviors than the autistic child with Heart Blood Deficiency and Heart Yin Deficiency. This child will tend towards aggressive behaviors.

### **Kidney Essence Deficiency**

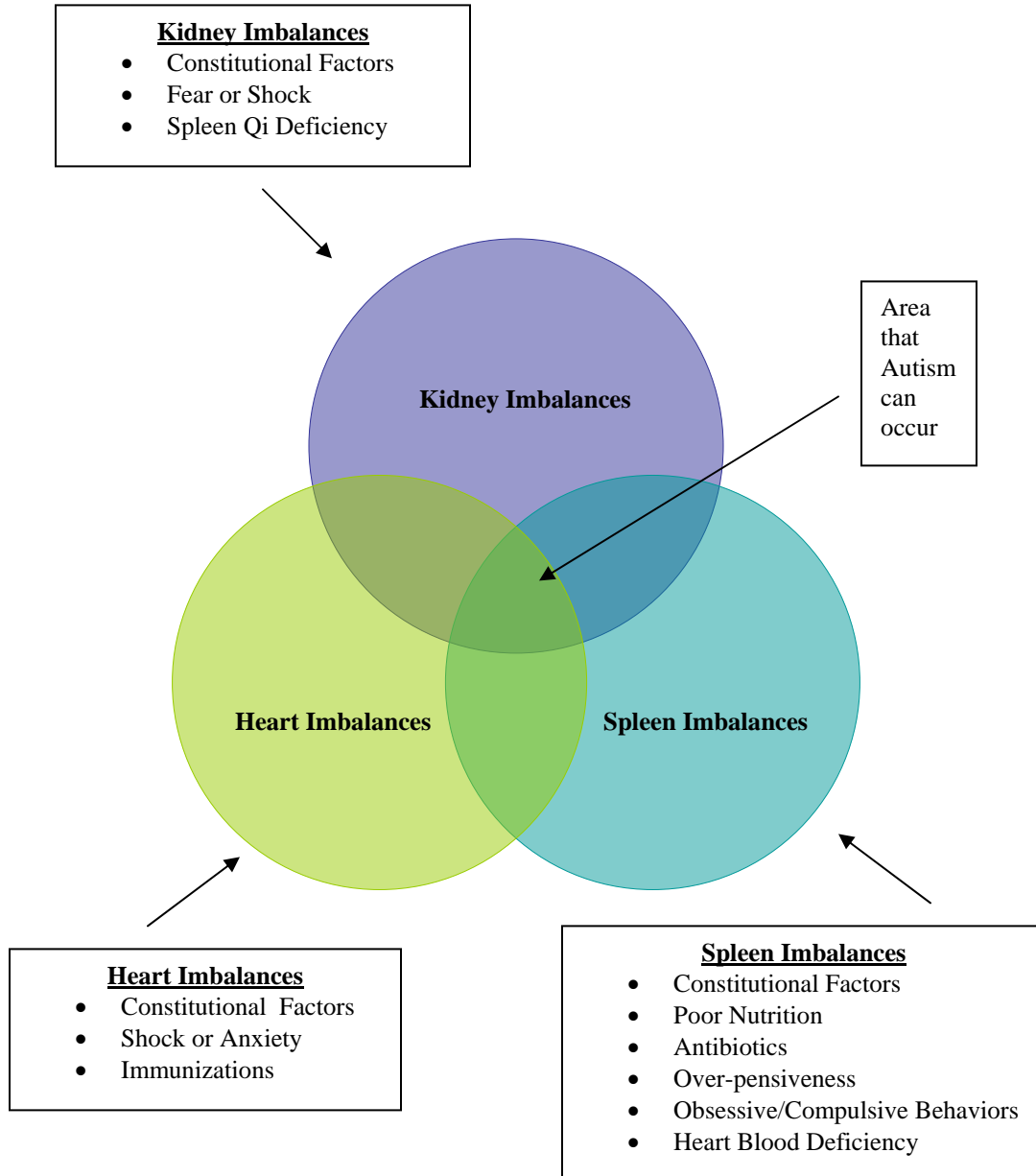
The young age at which Autism develops indicates that there is Kidney Essence Deficiency. Kidney Essence is necessary for brain nourishment and a deficiency in the Kidney Essence will result in poor mental development.

### **Spleen Qi Deficiency**

Children with Spleen Qi imbalances may have a tendency toward loose stools and develop phlegm conditions easily. Infant digestive difficulties may include colic, incessant drooling and excessive spitting up of milk. A child with a Spleen Qi imbalance may have little interest in food, an impaired sense of taste, or conversely, may be hungry and eat twenty-four hours. The latter would have more of a problem with constipation. Spleen Qi disharmonies also create a craving for sweets and damp-producing foods.

# PATHOLOGY

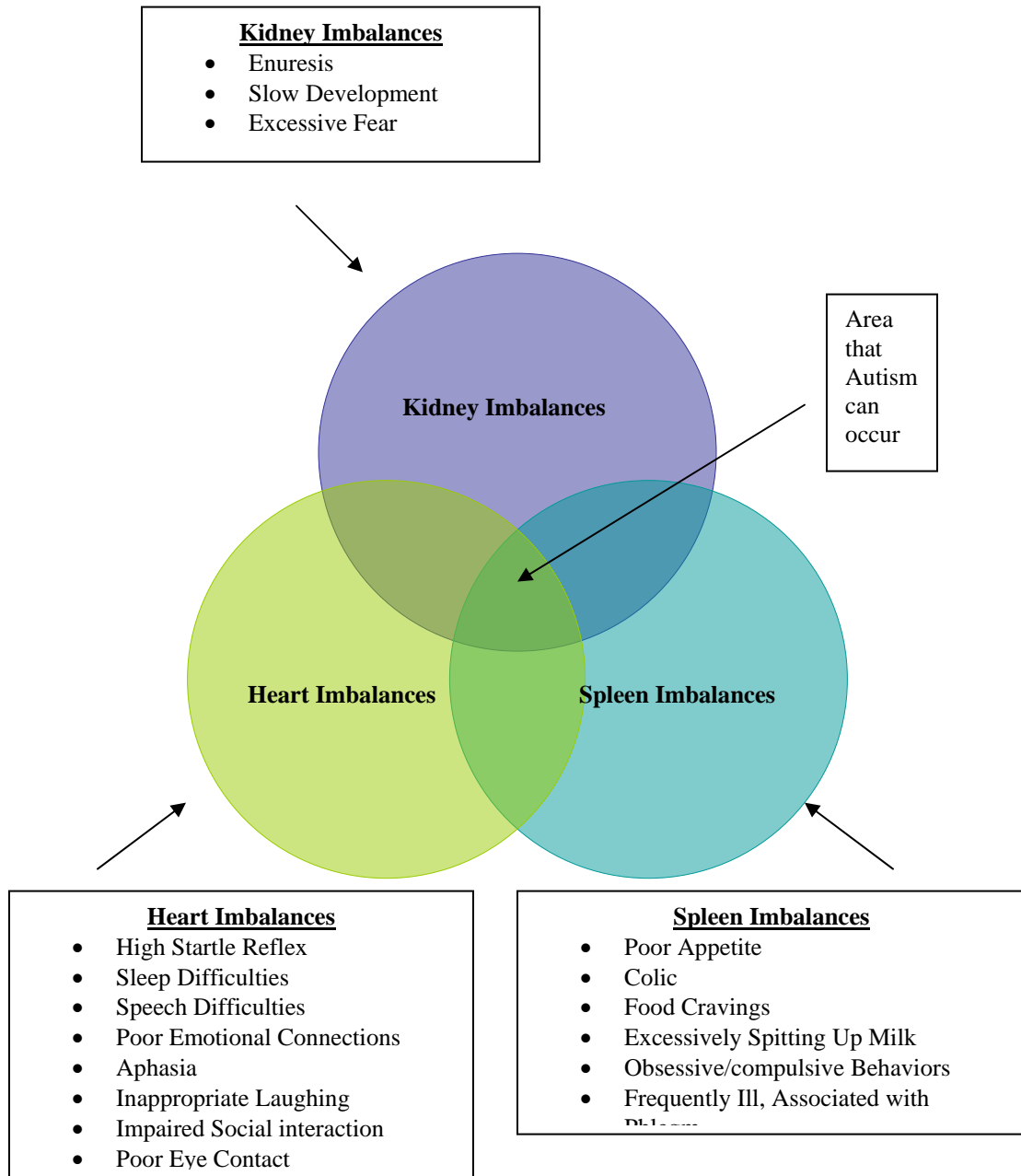
On an organ level the diagnosis of Autism relates to Heart, Kidney and Spleen imbalances.



The development of Autism can occur at the intersection of these three imbalances, as diagrammed by circles.

# AUTISTIC SYMPTOMOLOGY

From a Chinese Medicine Perspective



The development of Autism can occur at the intersection of these three imbalances, as diagrammed by circles.

## **TREATMENT**

Treatment principles for Autism include: Eliminate Phlegm, Tonify Heart Blood, Qi and Yin, Clear Heart Heat, Tonify Spleen Qi and Tonify Kidney Essence. Treatment strategies for Autism included in this paper are Herbal Medicine, Acupuncture and Dietary Therapy. These are not the only modalities that can be used with the Autistic child, but they are the ones with which I am most familiar and have witnessed benefits.

### **Herbal Medicine**

Herbal medicine is essential in the treatment of Autism and is considered the major pillar of Chinese Medicine. Evidence of herbal medicine exists dating from 2000 BCE. A comprehensive Materia Medica was written by 600 AD listing herbal medications and describing their actions and properties.

The most common substances found in Chinese Herbal Pharmacology are plants, including the root, leaves, flowers, rhizomes and branches. The treatment of patients with herbal medicine is always individualized, in order to treat the specific constitutional imbalances and the presenting manifestations of the individual.

Basic herbal formulas were developed in our clinic for the treatment of Autism. Adjustments are made to these formulas, based on individual needs. The formulas and other herbal suggestions are presented in depth in the paper on Autism prepared for CM professionals.

### **Acupuncture**

Acupuncture is also central in the treatment of Autism. There are specific points that help to nourish the Spleen, Heart and Kidneys as well as to resolve Phlegm. Some points are used specifically for clearing the mind and helping to restore speech. There are others that enhance mental functioning.

Research findings continue to be elusive regarding the specific mechanisms of acupuncture. Some theories on the cause of Autism are that the disorder may be a result of neuro-endocrine dysfunction or the incorrect production of opioids or other neuropeptides. It is known that acupuncture affects opioids, the central nervous system and neuro-endocrine function.<sup>3</sup> Within a Western framework this could explain why acupuncture is of benefit in the treatment of Autism.

The treatment of Autistic children with acupuncture requires patience and consistency. Acupuncture needles are specialized instruments. Unlike hypodermic needles, they are not hollow, and are roughly the thickness of a hair. It can take time for the child to acclimate to this approach, but the benefits are substantial and physical discomfort is often nonexistent. It is a difficult task that can be accomplished with proper knowledge and experience in pediatric acupuncture, adjusted to the specific needs of the Autistic child.

### **Nutritional Intervention**

1. Eat warming foods that have been lightly cooked or steamed.

A warming food in CM refers not only to the physical temperature of the food, but also to its energetic properties. For example, black pepper and dry

ginger are both warming foods, energetically. These are foods that when eaten create heat or warmth in the digestive tract. Foods that are considered warming include all vegetables, particularly root vegetables. Some suggested vegetables

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<sup>3</sup> Pomeranz, Bruce and Stux, Gabriel, Scientific Bases of Acupuncture, Springer-Verlag (1989), London,

include: acorn squash, spaghetti squash, butternut squash, pumpkins, kale, spinach, Swiss chard, collard greens, mustard greens, sweet potatoes, yams, turnips, radishes, carrots, button mushrooms and scallions. Suggested grains include brown rice, white rice, amaranth, millet, barley and quinoa. Suggested legumes include lima, navy, adzuki, kidney and lentil beans. Many animal proteins such as chicken or turkey are also considered warming. All meats should be additive, hormone and antibiotic free.

2. Eliminate cold and raw foods.

It is important to eliminate foods that are excessively cold. This includes foods that are cold physically and cold energetically. In order for the digestive system to work efficiently, it requires heat or energy for proper transformation of the food. Cold foods slow down the digestive process and contribute to poor digestion. Cold foods physically would refer to frozen foods such as Popsicles, ice cream and drinks that are heavily iced. Foods that are energetically cold include: soy products and most fruits.

3. Eliminate damp producing foods.

The elimination of damp producing foods is paramount in treating Autism. Excessive amounts of damp producing foods lead to the development of phlegm. Foods that produce dampness include: dairy (milk, cheese, yogurt, ice-cream) sugar, peanuts or peanut butter, fruit (particularly citrus and bananas), eggs, wheat, fried or greasy foods, chilled or frozen foods and excessive amounts of soy.

Other substances to be avoided because of their potential for allergic

reactions include all preservatives, food coloring, artificial flavorings and emulsifiers.

My experience has shown that the child who offers the most resistance to these changes is also the child who has the most to benefit from these changes.

## **CASE HISTORIES**

1. A. was diagnosed with mild Autism at the age of three. According to his mother, his childhood development had been normal until about age one, at which time he took antibiotics for three months to correct a recurrent ear infection. A. began receiving acupuncture in March of 1998 at age five. He presented with a vocabulary of fifteen to twenty words and could only make sentences of two to three words. He rarely initiated conversation. After nine months of treatment with acupuncture, herbal medicine and dietary modification, A's communication skills improved to such a degree that he was able to participate in a regular public school classroom. He is currently in the second grade. According to his mother his communication is good, he excels in math and he no longer has extreme temper tantrums.

2. B. began treatment in February of 1999. His development had been normal until eighteen months of age. His father believes that immunizations were a contributing factor to his Autism. Before treatment, he would often entertain himself with small objects or pieces of paper for hours at a time. He would not initiate conversation. During his treatment, he improved in the following ways: more eye contact, more coherent conversations and more interest in socialization. After six months of treatment, B. was initiating and carrying on conversations and his ability to concentrate on tasks improved. He no longer rocks and sits idly for hours.

3. According to his parents, C. was a normal child until approximately twelve months of age. They were pleased because he began eating solid foods at a younger age than his three older siblings and also ate a wide variety of foods. At eighteen months of age C. had no language development and his pediatrician suggested he might be hearing impaired or Autistic. He was diagnosed with Autism at three years and nine months of

age. According to his parents, C. did not seem to have any negative effects from immunizations but did have repeated antibiotics due to recurrent Upper Respiratory Infections.

C. was first seen at the Acupuncture clinic in January of 1998 when he was five years old. At this time, C. displayed no eye contact, no speech and did not respond to direct questions. His diet consisted primarily of spaghetti, peanut butter and jelly and bread.

C. is now eight years old and is in the first grade. Though he works below grade level, he is excited about learning to read. He now establishes eye contact and answers questions if given multiple choices. His parents believe Chinese Medicine has made substantial contributions in improving his behavior, his ability to concentrate and focus his attention and his gains in both receptive and expressive language. His parents have had to reduce his acupuncture treatments to twice monthly due to the long travel distance, but continue with herbal medications daily and dietary regulations.

4. D. was diagnosed with mild Autism in December of 1995. He had limited speech development, extreme fear and repeated upper respiratory infections. D. presented at the Chinese Acupuncture Clinic in March of 1996 at age three and a half. He received treatment consisting of acupuncture, herbal medicine and nutritional therapy for one year and two months.

After six months of treatment there was dramatic improvement in speech and eating habits with acceptance of a wider variety of foods and increased appetite. Social skills also improved with noticeably more eye contact. After fourteen months of treatment, D's improvement was remarkable. According to his mother, "Today my son is

like any other five year old boy and very different from the three year old he was, before seeking acupuncture.”

As of October of 2000, D. is participating in a normal second grade classroom, making straight A’s and B’s and reading at a fourth grade level.

## CONCLUSION

In Chinese Medicine, the diagnosis of Autism can be classified as either Phlegm Misting the Heart or Phlegm Fire Harassing the Heart.

The Autistic child will have symptoms that are linked to Heart, Spleen and Kidney imbalances. The Heart imbalance relates to the difficulties the child has in establishing meaningful emotional relationships with others, and communication/speech difficulties. The Spleen deficiency is linked to digestive anomalies that contribute to the development of Phlegm. Kidney involvement is related to the young age at which this condition develops.

The development of Autism is a multi-faceted pathway. There are no direct causes and effects for Autism Spectrum Disorders, though there are a set of co-factors that must be present. Recall that in CM, imbalances are related to External, Internal and Miscellaneous factors. The External and Internal factors can be a source of difficulty, but a major focus in Autism is on the Miscellaneous factors. Genetic factors can set the stage, but there must be other co-factors in order for Autism to develop. Nutritional and lifestyle factors must be addressed in the treatment plan. The manifestations of Phlegm and the root cause of Phlegm must be addressed. It is due to the very different pathways in the development of Autism that makes it difficult to assign causality.

Chinese Medicine can address Autism through a variety of modalities, including herbal medicine, acupuncture, Tui Na (massage), nutrition, aromatherapy, and manipulative therapies. The foundation for effective treatment for Autism within the CM framework is based on a multi-tiered approach that includes synergistic CM modalities. Autism is an imbalance that has the possibility of reversal. My experience in

treating Autistic children has resulted in significant gains in communication skills and a reduction of behaviors associated with Autism.

I would welcome the opportunity to participate in a controlled research study to further investigate the efficacy of an integrated CM approach. In the meantime I continue to work on an individual basis with Autistic children in my practice. My hope is for the benefits of CM be shared with more Autistic children so that they might lead more aware and fulfilling lives.