

*Qigong and occidental medicine :
two complementary practices to be
associated*



Dr MP Guillaume

Internal medicine department

St-Pierre University Hospital, Brussels, Belgium.



- Traditional Chinese medicine is interested in imbalances of the human body as an entity, and treats the whole human body to restore its balance, the so called « qi », through the plants and the practice of Qigong and T'ai Chi
- Whereas occidental medicine for two or three centuries is convinced that a disease is the result of a particular biological mechanism and that drugs are intended to repair it. Hence the occidental medicine is still developing purified molecules coming from pharmaceutical industry
- **Occidental medicine and traditional Chinese medicine are two fundamentally different approaches**

Mind-body practice in traditional Chinese medicine

- In Chinese culture, Qigong, a practice which has been developed over thousands of years, has been shown to be beneficial for physical health maintenance
- It combines static and dynamic physical exercises, breathing exercises and meditation
- **It is a traditional form of Chinese medical exercise, practiced:**
 - To help achieving
 - well-being,
 - health
 - longevity
 - To prevent or slow down the progress of disease

- In Occident, Qigong is considered as a **form of complementary and alternative therapy (CAM)**
- In European countries such as Belgium, medical practitioners have a very limited knowledge of Qigong
- The incorporation of such therapy into their conventional medical practice is not widespread despite the growing evidence of its efficiency in the field of health.
- In the last decade, numerous studies have evaluated the effectiveness of Qigong for various conditions and symptoms such as:

- - Stress management
- - Insomnia
- - Depression
- - Substances abuse
- - Fibromyalgia
- - Chronic low back pain
- - Diabetes
- - Hypertension
- - Cardiac rehabilitation
- - Oncology
- - Balance problems, falls
- - Parkinson's disease
- - Survivors of torture and refugee trauma

Clinical research application of the use of Qigong

- A vast number of studies on health qigong have been implemented in China since the seventies but
 - Most reports were published in Chinese, hence the difficulties for international experts to comment these studies
 - Most of the publications were brief reports with inadequate information for reproduction
- Most of the trials involved a high risk of bias in many domains:
 - Inadequate sample size: small, potentially underpowered
 - No information about recruitment, heterogeneous populations
 - Nature of the control group, non-randomized design
 - Use of different style of Qigong
 - Quality of teachers
 - Significant variance in the practice duration and frequency
 - Difference in study duration, majority : short-term follow-up

Presumed physiologic mechanisms of response

- Meditative movements promote relaxation and decrease sympathetic nervous system and engage the para-sympathic system
- Improve cardiovascular and pulmonary function
- Reduce clinical somatic symptoms, anxiety, depression
- Improve immune function and vaccine-response
- Increase blood levels of endorphins
- Reduce levels of inflammatory markers, circulating stress hormone (adrenocorticotropic hormone)

- Physiological studies have been conducted on qigong practitioners
- Regular practice of qigong will lead to:
 - Decrease in heart rate
 - Decrease in respiratory rate
 - Regulate blood pressure
 - Correct breathing errors, re-establish a proper breathing pattern
 - Decrease in oxygen consumption
 - Decrease levels of lipids
 - Similar effect to antidepressants

Applications in Neurology

- Treatment and prevention of mental disorders: number of studies with significant positive effects
- There are several conditions for which efficiency of Qigong has been clearly demonstrated:
 - Migraine - headache
 - Depression
 - Insomnia
- For the following neurologic applications, the evidences are limited, due mostly to the quality of studies or the lack of studies:
 - Parkinson's disease
 - Stroke
 - Cognitive dysfunction

Managing stress and anxiety

- Stress has become a worldwide problem
- The most common reaction to stress is anxiety
- If intense and prolonged stress is not managed:
 - It can reduce immune function
 - It can lead to a range of health problems such as:
 - Depression
 - Fatigue
 - Insomnia
 - Headache
 - Stomach-ache
 - Problematic eating disorders
 - Hypertension
 - Cardiovascular disease
 - Cancer

Substances abuse: use of Qigong in the detoxification of heroin addicts

- 1 study: 86 patients, randomized
 - Qigong treatment group, medication group, no-treatment control group
- 1 study: 248 patients, non-randomized
 - Qigong meditation twice daily, 5 days a week, during 2 weeks
- Results:
 - Fewer withdrawal symptoms
 - Greater reduction in cravings, occurring more rapidly
 - Improvement of anxiety scores
 - Lower relapse rate
 - No side effects

Depression and elderly people

- Prevalence rate of depression among the worldwide population: 3 to 15 or 40% among elderly persons
- Elderly people suffering from chronic physical illnesses such as
 - Parkinson's disease
 - Diabetes
 - Cardiac or respiratory diseases
 - Stroke survivors
 - Vision impairment
- Are more vulnerable because of:
 - Their own disabilities
 - Their reduced psychosocial resources: self-efficiency and sense of mastery
 - Incapacity to control many aspects of their live

- The effects of pharmacological treatments and psychotherapy are far from satisfactory:
 - >30% of the patients not responding to those treatments
 - wide range of side-effects
- *Further to the unsatisfactory results of mainstream* interventions, physical exercises such as qigong has been recognized as an effective adjunct treatment
- Health qigong is a safe form of therapy even for the frail elderly people, with very low chance of developing side effects
 - Reduction of disability
 - Increased psychosocial resources: self-efficiency
 - Reduction in depression
 - Improvement of well being

Cognitive function of subjects at risk of progressive decline (2 studies)

- Sustained improvements in global cognitive functioning
- Improvement in delayed recall
- Improvement of subjective complaints
- Exercises: tri time a week during 5 months / western exercises

Parkinson's disease

- Improvement axial symptoms such as postural stability
- Improvement
 - Strength of bilateral knee extensors and flexors
 - Balance
 - Transitioning from a seated to a standing position
 - Walking
 - Number of falls

Chronic fatigue syndrome

- Fibromyalgia: chronic widespread pain, fatigue, cognitive disturbances, sleep disorders, high amount of somatic and psychological distress
- It is a challenging illness for patients and for health care providers
- None of the conventional treatments explored so far have shown persistent or significant outcome
- The number of controlled trials on the effectiveness of Qigong exercise for the treatment of fibromyalgia is limited and the findings are inconsistent across the studies
- Qigong with meditation can reduce fatigue, depression, sleep disorders, but pain remains difficult to control

Oncology

- Exercises can improve the person's physical ability
- Impact on Quality of life
 - positive impact on fatigue for people living with cancer
 - positive impact on vitality and mental health
- Benefits for the management of anxiety symptoms, sleep disorders are cancer depending
 - reduces depressive symptoms in women with breast cancer receiving radiotherapy
- Improvement of post-operative pulmonary functions and quality of life in lung cancer
- Improvement of the immune function of patients compared to patients treated with a conventional method only
 - reduction of inflammatory markers: CRP and cortisol
 - better level of white blood cells after chemotherapy (decrease neutropenia)

Studies about effects of Baduanjin exercise

- It is easy to learn and has a less physical and cognitive demanding
- In older adults:
 - Improves overall sleep quality, subjective sleep quality, sleep latency, sleep duration, sleep efficiency and day time dysfunction after 4 weeks
 - Improve the body morphology: strength, flexibility and balance
- In middle-aged women:
 - Increases antioxidant enzymes and reduces oxidative stress
 - Improves quality of life: physical function, body pain, social function and mental health
- Provides a safe treatment option for patients with osteoarthritis
 - Reduction of pain, stiffness, disability, improvement of muscular strength
- Improve blood lipid metabolism
- Improves insulin sensitivity
 - Reduction the levels of blood sugar and glycosylated haemoglobin

In conclusion

- Regular practice of qigong, and in particular of health qigong would be good for health and quality of life
- Health qigong such as Baduanjin is easy to practice in a population of older adults
- Its benefits are quickly realized
- Therefore, it can be practiced as a defensive art, as an art of health or an art of life
- And it can be used as a complementary therapy by occidental medicine

In conclusion

- Neighbours, occidental medicine and Chinese medicine could develop synergies through qigong, particularly in the management of chronic diseases and serious illnesses



- Complementarity is marching off...

