



August (Winter) 2010, 3 pages

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE AND VELVET Part 1

By Andy Cowan

Here we are, supplying to Asian markets one of the most commonly used and effective medicines used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) – velvet antler. Most of us who farm velvet stags in order to supply velvet to the market probably know quite a bit about what we are doing.

What do we know? Of prime importance is the removal and storage of the antler. We have participated in an industry managed course in order to accomplish the pain-free and humane removal of the antler. We understand the ethical implications and the importance in maintaining the animal welfare standards highlighted in the National Velvet Accreditation Scheme. Depending on the market we are supplying, we know at what stage of growth we should remove the antler. We know how to store the antler prior to selling it to the pools or a private buyer. The marketers tell us that bigger velvet is worth more than smaller velvet so we try to grow the biggest velvet we can. This means we must have the correct genetics and healthy, well fed animals. This is our strength as farmers, and possibly the limit of our knowledge in relation to growing velvet. We have many other things to do in order to run our farms so we leave the marketing of velvet to those better equipped to do so.

An integral part of the deer industry is the research needed for us to understand our products – growing deer efficiently and marketing venison and velvet. Although research into velvet antler has been carried out for many years in countries like China, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan and the USSR, more recently more intensive research on the efficacy and safety of deer velvet has been carried out in Western countries such as New Zealand, USA, Canada, Europe and Australia. This is arguably a sign that TCM may involve treatments and ingredients that western medicine can incorporate into their system of healing.

To generalise to the extreme – Western medicine is concerned with the body as a physical thing. It constantly looks for harmful things that cause disease and sickness and which disrupt “normal” functions of the body. TCM is based on relationships and the balance of everything in the universe of which humans are a small part. The West focuses on the physical, measurable substances – cause and effect, whereas TCM focuses on the “ether”, the space between the physical particles and the flow of energy which may have to be manipulated in order to rebalance energy flows. This flow of energy is commonly translated and referred to as “Qi”.

TCM believes that Qi is unlimited and that everything in the universe relies on Qi. There are two aspects of Qi – energy and conscious intelligence or information. Every system carries its own unique Qi, which allows it to perform its unique functions – either physical (which western medicine can describe) and energetic (which TCM can identify). When Qi flows freely in a living entity is called health. When Qi is blocked, there is sickness. The Qi acts as a carrier of information, which in the human body is transferred through the meridian system.

There are a number of major meridians running through the human body. It is over this network that Qi travels through the body allowing the body’s various organs to send messages to one another. TCM understands that everything is composed of two complementary energies: one energy is yin and the other is yang. They are never separate and one cannot exist without the other. For this reason, keeping the meridians clear is imperative for the body’s self-regulating actions to occur. Through proper training, people can develop the sensitivity to feel the flow of Qi.

The theory of Yin and Yang contains no absolutes. By calling something “yin” or “yang”, TCM is always comparing something with something else. For example, the sun and daytime are considered to be yang in relation to the moon and the night, which are yin. According to the Theory of Yin and Yang, male is yang; female is yin. Everything in the body is also under the control of the two elements – yin and yang. They depend on each other for definition and therefore mutually create each other. Other examples of yin/yang are dark/light; stillness/movement; winter/summer/ contraction/expansion and interior/exterior. Yin and yang are opposites but cannot exist without the other. As yin and yang have an inseparable relationship, if there is a problem with one, the other will definitely be affected.

Yin/yang is not an actual substance or force the way we might envisage it in western society. Yin/yang is simply a way of describing interrelations and interactions of the natural powers that happen in the world. Yin-yang are conflicting yet mutually dependent and would not be able to survive on their own – without coldness there is no heat, without movement there is no stillness and without darkness there is no light. In a healthy system, yin and yang will always be in balance and, more importantly, in harmony. I am reminded of a mantra of one of my soil mentors – “excess equals deficiency”.

Although I give myself next to no chance of ever understanding TCM, I do regularly visit a TCM practitioner. Although we have a slight language barrier, and me having a Western-type background, I recently spent a couple of hours with him trying to understand his methods in diagnosing health problems using TCM. If I wasn't sick when I arrived I was definitely a little light-headed when I left. He explained to me that he was about the 30th generation of his family to practice TCM. Traditionally, this has been a major way TCM has progressed over the years – handed down from father to son. Also, because many practitioners of TCM follow the documented works of their predecessors, very few new formulas have been created. The reason for this may be obvious – the case studies and results developed and accumulated over thousands of years speak for themselves.

The following is a quote from a research project completed by Chris Tuckwell entitled “Velvet Antler – a summary of literature on health benefits. A Report for RIRDC by Chris Tuckwell. November 2003. RIRDC Project No. DIP-10A”. “An important concept that is a common theme of many research papers is that the combination of all components of velvet antler provides a synergistic effect that is greater than the total effect that would be achieved by the separate use of each of its individual constituents. That means that if velvet is broken down into its constituents that are used separately, their combined effect is significantly less than the effect realised when the nutrients are provided in the naturally combined form of velvet antler. In summary, the effect of the complete product is greater than the summed effect of all components.” (Tuckwell). I realise that the scope of the project was fairly limiting but, to me this is a fairly “western” response to an “eastern” idea. I am not sure if breaking down any substance to its component parts is the way to try to explain and understand why TCM does what it does.

There is now doubt that deer antler is a unique substance. The recent antler/stem cell research has many exciting possibilities. What triggered my curiosity about deer velvet, apart from the above quote, was the variation in prices for velvet, the grading system itself and how and why velvet is prepared for human consumption. My TCM practitioner has given me some interesting insights as to why people buy different types and styles of velvet and what their uses are. I hope to outline one or two of his ideas in the next issue.

References

Subhuti Dharmananda. "Deer Antler – to Nourish Blood, Bone and Joints." Director, Institute for traditional Medicine, Portland, Oregon.

Dr. Elaine Jette. "The Yin-Yang of Deer Antler or The east and West Use of Deer Antler in Medicine."

Chris Tuckwell. "Australian Velvet Antler and Deer Co Products – Developing domestic markets. Part A." A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation – by Rural Industry Developments. June 2001. RIRDC Publication No. 01/085.

Chris Tuckwell. "Velvet Antler – a summary of the literature on health benefits." A Report for RIRDC. November 2003. RIRDC Project No DIP-10A.

Gwyn Jones – Personal communications.

Dawn Clarke, Chunyi Li, Wenying Wang, Shirley K. Martin and James M. Suttie. "Vascluar Localization and Proliferation in the Growing Tip of the Deer Antler." AgResearch, Invermay Agricultural Centre, Mosgiel, New Zealand. The Anatomical Record Part A. 288A-981 (2006).

