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TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE AND VELVET Part 2

By Andy Cowan

A recent review by Townsend and Weerasuriya (2010) into the links between mental health and well-being and the availability of green spaces, particularly in cities, showed that there was evidence suggesting “access to the natural environment improves health and well-being, as well as preventing heart disease and helping people recover from illness”. In fact, some of the earliest documented histories of China, Greece and Persia also indicated this. This brings me back to the article I wrote in the last issue where I referred to Chris Tuckwell’s project on velvet antler. Chris was explaining that when velvet is administered whole it has a far greater effect than if its individual components were administered. In the West, we are still trying to find all the pieces that go into making a healthy life. We are slowly combining these “new” requirements in such a way that we many, one day, possibly understand what is needed.

The next problem will then be to convince the population that they need to be pro-active in order to maintain good health. This is especially difficult when western medicine is so good at repairing our bodies. In Australia’s case the government is willing to pay nearly 70% of their population’s medical expenses. Hence in some cases, people do not feel the need to be pro-active about their health. With sedentary lifestyles and fast foods no doubt this will be a real problem in the future.

In conversations with my friend and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioner, I learnt of many interesting ideas and beliefs that he has been bought up with in his home country. The first, and most basic of beliefs, is that good health is not something that should be bought.

In the past, travel was limited. It was often local produce that was used in the preparations. For this reason, the father/son relationship was particularly important in passing on the knowledge for the treatments of the locals. Although the son was learning from his father at a very early age, there were some things that the father did not mention to his son until he reached a certain age. My friend was 25 years old before his father told him things that he did not want his competitors to know. In his words – young men/boys tend to talk too much and are not totally reliable at keeping secrets.

My friend also believes that many westerners have a limited understanding of TCM because of inaccurate translations from Chinese – both written and verbal. Those of you that have learnt a foreign language at school would appreciate how easy it is to translate poorly. For example, if you learnt French for five years in Australia, then went to some obscure town in the north of France for a week – I wonder how much of their dialect you would understand and how much you would misinterpret.

He also mentioned the fact that much of the literature on the internet equates to some sort of advertising pushing a particular angle. In some cases, the information can be taken out of context and be quite misleading. He stressed the fact that although TCM is based on the processing of natural materials, this does not mean that there are no side effects. In western society, medication often has a list of possible side effects written somewhere so that the user has an idea of what could go wrong. It was pointed out to me that deer velvet was the safest product of all those he prescribes. He has access to at least 100, mostly imported, natural products that he uses for his patients – I counted the drawers on his wall containing various products. The four most commonly used natural products in his treatments are in the Araceae family – the Typhonium Giganteum or more commonly called the Voodoo Lily from China. He did mention that, if the ingestion of ginseng not carefully prescribed and monitored, it could have harmful side-effects.

There are four main tools that my friend uses to access a patient. The reading of the “pulse” gives him the most information about his patient. However, he also observes the general appearance of his patient, the intonation in the voice and, of course, he asks his patient questions. The reading of the pulse is an art form in itself. It took my friend ten years to understand the basics of this ancient skill. He places three fingers on either wrist and feels the pulse at three different pressure levels at each site. The interpretation of the pulse on the left arm tells him if there is a problem with either the heart, small intestine, blood, liver, gall bladder, bladder or kidney. The information discovered from the right arm has to do with the lungs, large intestine, stomach, spleen and kidney and “mingmen”. The kidneys and mingmen are looked upon as the most vital organs in the body. The mingmen is found in the kidneys and is the “place of birth and giving birth . . .” (Qu Lifang).

So, knowing that deer antler is one of the most commonly used products by this particular TCM practitioner, how can we benefit from his knowledge. The velvet grading system we use is still developing. In his mind, the one thing it has done correctly is to consider the circumference of the velvet to be very important. It is a reflection of the health and strength of the stag. The length of the velvet and the number of tines is less important. In fact, in his opinion, the reason that Korean size velvet is asked for is simply to make more money. The most valuable sections of a stick of velvet are outlined in the diagrams below. The most notable thing about the comparison between the Korean versus Taiwanese cuts are the amounts of “less valuable” velvet. This lower valued velvet, which is less potent in the eyes of TCM, is processed and put into value added products which make more profit.

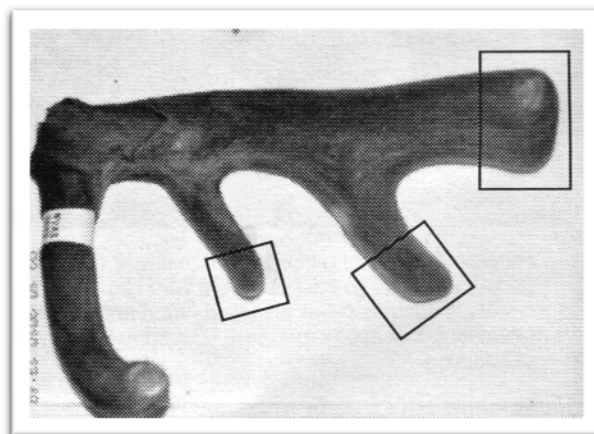
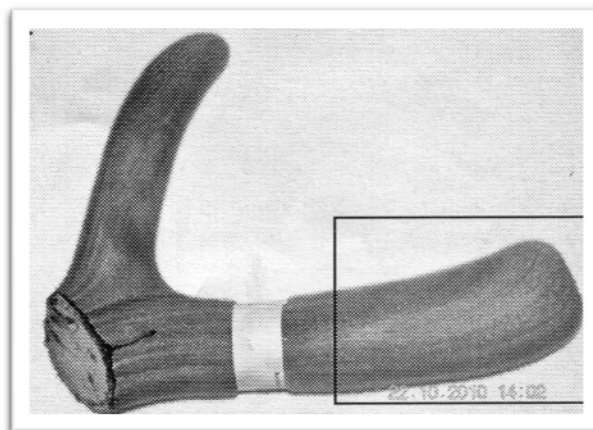
Interestingly, the smaller species of deer, like the fallow and sika, are used more in relation to men’s health issues to boost yang. The larger species, such as red and elk, are used to help with women’s health issues to boost yin. Although not a golden rule, this is generally the case. Velvet from half-breed stags are dependent on

Sika velvet ‘stronger’ product

their shape as to what they are likely to be used for. It should also be remembered that the dried weight of a Taiwanese stick will be about 20% of its green weight and the Korean cut will be about 30%. This is in agreement with research done in New Zealand when measuring the ash content of velvet antler. You would expect velvet grown to 65 days to contain a higher ash content than the shorter younger antler.

If I may quote a section of Marika McKinnon’s story on p4 “one thing is not different on the other side of the world . . . the prices received for velvet by deer farmers are nowhere near enough for farmers to live comfortably.” Hopefully we have not been subsidizing velvet processors and marketers. Perhaps in not understanding the true value of velvet, we have been selling it too cheaply. Also, we may be trying too hard to find out why a particular treatment works when there are so many other forces affecting the outcome of it.

Red velvet ‘stronger’ product



References

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3. Qu Lifang. *Mingmen – Observing “Gate of Life” in the Qigong State. Chengdu College. Journal of Chinese Medicine #40 Sept. 1992.*

