

It works for me: Chinese medicine

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by Lisa Grainger

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Living herbally ever after

Three years ago Teresa Camps, 35, no longer wanted to live. She'd wake up in the morning, dreading getting out of bed. Her body was achy, her joints heavy. She felt tired and, worse, she not only had constant bouts of diarrhoea, wind and abdominal pain, but she was passing blood up to eight times a day. At her most unhealthy, she weighed less than seven stone (44.5kg).

Camps, a care assistant and mother of one, had been to her GP on numerous occasions over the years complaining of painful bowels, general lethargy and illness. Her doctor prescribed drugs to help the pain and prevent a build-up of acid. Three years ago, after she collapsed, he performed a rectal examination and admitted her to hospital.

The specialists did every test they could think of. "I had barium meals, barium enemas, scans, a camera down my oesophagus, things in my stomach, X-rays, the lot," she says. "It was only when they did an endoscopy that they realised I had severe ulcerative colitis, a condition doctors do not yet fully understand. My colon was so covered in ulcers that they couldn't see the wall at all. I was so ill I was in hospital for nearly two months while they looked at me, tested me and fed me morphine to dull the pain. I don't know how I survived."

Camps put up with the discomfort, with only water administered by drip, for eight weeks. But, when there appeared to be no progress, she discharged herself. "I wasn't getting better," she says, "and the drugs weren't working." She went home with drugs that would ease the pain, tablets to coat her intestine wall and a stock of food drinks prescribed by dietitians to try to build her weight. She was so depressed that she knew she had to try something else. "Can you imagine my life?" she says. "I couldn't go out. I had no energy and the drugs had started to make me grow facial hair."

A friend of Camps, whose health had improved after trying Chinese herbal medicine, recommended Steve Kippax, a practitioner in nearby Ipswich. A month after she left hospital, she consulted him. "My life hasn't been the same since," she says. Some days she doesn't remember she is ill at all; others she merely feels tired. She now eats a healthy diet, exercises and has a full social life again.

Kippax trained at the School of Herbal Medicine in Tunbridge Wells, in Kent, and completed postgraduate studies at the School of Chinese Herbal Medicine in London before studying at the international training centre at the Traditional Medicine Hospital in Guangzhou, China. Today he practises both in London and Ipswich, using a mixture of herbal medicine, nutritional advice, t'ai chi and acupuncture to treat clients.

His success with Camps delights but doesn't surprise him. "Chinese medicine is not just about body," he says. "It's about how you feel and Teresa needed to heal her mind as well as her body."

He questioned her about her life: her illnesses, bowel motions and appetite. Then, by looking, asking and feeling, he built a picture of her overall wellbeing.

"I looked at her tongue, felt her pulse, listened to her cough," he says. "In China, pulse and tongue are important — they reveal not only how healthy the body is, but the state of chi, or energy flow. And from that I discovered that she had 'damp heat' in the intestine."

Damp heat, he explains, is a diagnosis which can be traced back to a weak liver. To regain the balance of energy, he recommended a mixture of treatments: herbs to heal her intestine and to dull the pain; a diet to boost strength, and t'ai chi to heal her spiritually and emotionally.

Camps admits she was sceptical after her first consultation. "I went home and said to my family: 'I can't believe this. I have just spent £120 on a bagful of bloody roots and bark that this bloke might have found under a tree. I must be mad'."

As well as having to brew, in three-quarters of a pint of water, a mix of yam (to reduce inflammation), agrimony (to stop bleeding), and peony and gardenia (to reduce heat), she was given other herbs to blacken in a flame before making them into a tea (to reduce bleeding). Both dark brown mixtures not only looked foul but, she says, tasted absolutely disgusting and she nearly gagged.

For a few days, nothing happened. Then on the fourth day, she noticed that she had passed no blood at all. Then the pain started to subside, her diarrhoea became more controlled and the night sweats that for years had woken her, vanished. When she went back to the hospital after six months, the ulcers had not just become less inflamed but had reduced substantially in size.

Two years later Camps only rarely has to burn herbs to stop bouts of bleeding. She still feels some pain and heaviness but, to the hospital specialist's amazement, her colon is completely clear of ulcers and her weight has increased to nine and a half stone.

She puts her wellbeing down not only to herbs but to a healthier lifestyle. She eats only fruit, veg, brown rice, natural goat's yoghurt, salad, fish, chicken and wholemeal bread, and never has wheat, chocolate, any fatty foods, nuts or alcohol.

For the past year Kippax has been giving her acupuncture once a month and she does a t'ai chi class once a week, then practises at home every other day. "You have to be dedicated," she admits. "But once you change your lifestyle, the results are incredible."