



Exploring the influence of Traditional Chinese Medicine on self-care among Chinese cancer patients



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A B S T R A C T

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Purpose: The aim of this study was to explore the influence of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) on self-care among Chinese cancer patients.

Methods: This was an exploratory qualitative study. A purposive sample of thirty cancer patients who were currently undergoing either chemotherapy or radiotherapy was interviewed. Qualitative content analysis was conducted for data analysis.

Results: Two core categories were emerged from their accounts of experiences with practising TCM-supported self-care activities: perceived beneficial effects and concerns about undesirable effects. The perceived beneficial effects of these self-care activities were mainly stemmed from the traditional beliefs in TCM, which included: strengthening the “origin”, removing toxins, and mind-soothing. Concerns about undesirable effects of these self-care activities were raised due to lack of knowledge and unpleasant experience with these self-care activities.

Conclusion: The findings revealed that the philosophy of TCM had been deeply integrated by Chinese cancer patients into their self-care. While Western medicine is the mainstream cancer treatment, Chinese cancer patients also practised various TCM-supported self-care activities. However, they were perplexed about the effects of these self-care activities. They could not ascertain whether the perceived benefits were just due to their own belief in the TCM philosophy, and their lack of knowledge in this aspect and unpleasant experience further confused them. Nurses have to be proactive in identifying the unique health-deviation self-care requisites of their clients in a culturally sensitive manner, explore how their self-care experience affects their wellbeing and treatment compliance, and be prepared to clarify misconceptions about their conditions and progress.

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Introduction

Self-care is defined as learned behaviours initiated and performed by an individual personally in response to perceived health changes with an intention to promote health and well-being, prevent disease or health deterioration, and care for long-term conditions (Department of Health, 2006; Orem, 2001; World Health Organization, 1984). Such acts are known as health deviation self-care requisites resulting from injury, disease and its treatment,

according to Orem's theory of self-care (Orem, 2001). Although the effectiveness of cancer treatment has been greatly improved in recent decades and become the dominant approach, it has been widely reported that cancer patients practised different self-care activities as complementary means to manage the physical and emotional impacts of cancer and its treatment (Kidd et al., 2008; Lou et al., 2013a).

Given that these self-care activities might have significant impacts on patients' health and wellbeing, treatment effects and compliance, as well as healthcare utilization, the concept of self-care has been examined extensively among cancer patients. Studies found that patients practised self-care to alleviate distress, such as fatigue, nausea and vomiting, and to learn to live with the effects of cancer and its treatment (Lou et al., 2013b; Williams et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2006). Apart from the substantial evidence of the beneficial effects

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of various self-care activities on clinical outcomes (Hoffman, 2013; Lou et al., 2013a, 2013b; Williams et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2006), literature also suggests the importance of self-care in psychological well-being. Knobf and Sun (2005) found that engaging in self-care activities is an integral component of the coping process among cancer patients, based on the self-regulation theory. Kidd et al. (2008) also noted that active participation in self-care activities enables cancer patients to preserve a sense of normality and self-identity. Therefore, cancer patients are being increasingly encouraged to take a proactive role in self-care (Lorig and Holman, 2003). Williams and associates had compared the cross-cultural differences in self-care activities among cancer patients in the Midwestern United States, Philippines and China and they found that many self-care activities stemmed from folk remedies within the cultural context (Williams et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2006). Hence, self-care appears to have both medical and social connotations, and thus the practice of self-care has to be understood in the personal and cultural context. However, recent studies on self-care have been largely quantitative, limited to the efficacy of self-care activities and among patients in western countries. Little work has been done to explore the nature of the self-care activities in Chinese cancer patients and their experiences with their self-care activities.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which is generally delivered by qualified practitioners, has been practised for thousands of years in the Chinese culture. TCM comprises different modalities, including herbal remedies, dietary therapy, acupuncture, Chinese massage (tuina), moxibustion, cupping, and mind-body therapies such as qi gong and tai chi (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 2010). Despite their different natures, the guiding principle of all these practices is to restore the yin (陰)-yang (陽) balance and promote the circulation of the qi (氣) in the body to enhance immunity and reduce toxicities (Wong et al., 2001; Xu et al., 2006). Yin and yang are two opposite counteracting forces in the body and qi is a vital energy or force which circulates through meridians in the body (Konkimalla and Efferth, 2008; Lu et al., 2004; Schwartz, 2004). From the TCM perspective, cancer is understood as a result of yin-yang imbalance and qi stagnation in the body, rather than a stand-alone diagnosis (Cohen et al., 2002; Schwartz, 2004; Wong et al., 2001; Xu et al., 2006). In addition, chemotherapeutic agents further act as heat toxins that damage the yin and the qi in the body, thus contributing to compromised immunity and cancer recurrence (Wong et al., 2001; Xu et al., 2006). This may explain why several studies have shown that the use of TCM is widespread among Chinese cancer patients as an adjuvant to Western medicine (Chen et al., 2008; Choe et al., 2006; Chui et al., 2005; Cohen et al., 2002; Cui et al., 2004; Simpson, 2003; So et al., 2012; Wong et al., 2001; Xu et al., 2006). Different TCM modalities are used to harmonize the balance and enhance the flow of the qi in the body with the intention of increasing immunity and preventing metastasis (Cohen et al., 2002; Konkimalla and Efferth, 2008; Lu et al., 2004; Wong et al., 2001; Xu et al., 2006).

In the Chinese culture, the philosophy of TCM is woven into every aspect of daily life for health maintenance, because it is believed that health is achieved through continual efforts to maintain yin-yang balance and the smooth circulation of qi (Schwartz, 2004). With a long tradition in the culture, some common health management strategies supported by the philosophy of the TCM have been passed on through generations. Hence, most of the Chinese people have some knowledge of TCM, even though they have not received any proper training (Simpson, 2003). It is not surprising to find that Chinese people often interpret their health conditions in TCM terms, based on their understanding of it, and believe in their ability to manage their health problems with their knowledge and skills through self-care activities. However, much previous research has mainly focused on examining the effects of discrete TCM modalities,

such as herbal medication and acupuncture, on symptom management in cancer patients (Hopkins Hollis, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Molassiotis et al., 2009). Little is known about how the philosophy of TCM has impacted the self-care of Chinese cancer patients. This study would be valuable in complementing to existing literature on patient-centered and culturally-focused self-care.

Aim

Given that TCM may play an important role in shaping the self-care activities of Chinese cancer patients, the purpose of this study was to explore how the philosophy of TCM has influenced self-care among Chinese cancer patients in Hong Kong. The specific objectives of this exploratory qualitative study are (1) to understand the reasons why Chinese cancer patients practise self-care activities underpinned by the TCM philosophy, and (2) to understand their experiences and perceptions of these self-care activities.

Methods

Setting and participants

This study was conducted at the oncology outpatient department of an acute hospital in Hong Kong. Purposive sampling was used to recruit cancer patients who i) were aged 18 years or above; ii) were able to speak Cantonese; iii) were currently receiving either chemotherapy or radiotherapy; iv) had a score of Karnofsky Performance Status (KPS) ≥ 60 (Karnofsky and Buchenal, 1949) and; v) had experience of, or were currently practising, any self-care activities which are related to the TCM philosophy. As this is an exploratory study, it was planned to recruit 15 participants for each treatment group (chemotherapy and radiotherapy), with both genders equally represented. This sample size was determined based on the nature of the study topic, scope of the study, quality of data and study design (Morse, 2000).

Data collection

Permission for the study was obtained from the University Survey and Behavioural Ethics Committee and the Cluster Research Ethics Committee. This study was undertaken by a research team with seven nurse researchers who were experienced in qualitative research and oncology care, and one experienced nurse who was currently working in an administrative role in the oncology department. All of them supported the study in different capacities, from the study conceptualization to data analysis. Prior to data collection, participants were given information about the purpose of the study and they were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences to their treatment. After written informed consent was obtained, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the participants. An interview schedule was prepared by four researchers (YC, CC, KC & AS). All interviews were conducted by a trained research nurse, who had been involved in many oncology research studies, to ensure the consistency of the data collection. Interviews were conducted in a private room at the oncology outpatient department using the interview schedule (Table 1). Participants were asked in the interviews to share their experiences and perceptions of self-care activities they had practised which are related to the TCM philosophy.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to describe the phenomena of interest in a systematic and objective way (Morse, 1994). All audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by

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