

A Case Study on Treating Narcolepsy from the Perspective of Strengthening the Spleen and Promoting Digestion

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Abstract

Narcolepsy is a rare sleep disorder characterized by uncontrollable daytime drowsiness, paroxysmal cataplexy, sleep paralysis, sleep hallucination and night sleep disorder, with unknown pathogenesis and younger onset. The western medicine used in this disease has strong dependence, drug resistance and great adverse reactions; Traditional Chinese medicine treatment has the advantages of good curative effect and little adverse reaction. According to the symptoms, Chinese medicine classifies the disease as "sleepiness", "lethargy" and "drunken meal", and treats it mostly from the spleen. Based on the patient's symptoms, signs, medical history and tongue and pulse, it is distinguished as a syndrome of dietary stagnation. The main treatment methods are to eliminate food and guide stagnation, strengthen the spleen and eliminate phlegm, awaken the brain and open the orifices. Oral treatment of traditional Chinese medicine combined with External treatment of acupuncture have achieved good results, providing clinical ideas and basis for the clinical treatment of narcolepsy.

Keywords: narcolepsy, Strengthening spleen and promoting digestion, Acupuncture, Chinese medicine, clinical experience

1. Introduction

Narcolepsy ^[1] is a kind of sleep disorder characterized by uncontrollable daytime drowsiness, paroxysmal cataplexy, sleep paralysis, sleep hallucination and night sleep disorder. The prevalence rate of Chinese population is about 0.034%^[2]. Narcolepsy is a sleep disorders that are characterized by unpredictable daytime thinking, having attacks, sleep paralysis, sleeping illusion, and night sleep disorders ^[1]. The prevalence of the crowd in my country is about 0.034%^[2], the peak of the age of onset of my country is 8-12 years old ^[3]. Patients have severe clinical symptoms when they occur, which has a great impact on daily life, learning and physical development. The incidence of seizures is low, the clinical recognition rate is not high, and it is easily misdiagnosed as other mental illness and delayed treatment ^[4]. The clinical clinical of this disease is divided into two types of larvae with typical sudden fall and larvaelessness. Most of them think that ^[5] is related to the typical sudden swelling. The pathogenic mechanism of the inverted drowsiness is not yet clear. Most of the western medicine uses symptomatic treatment. The curative effect is not good and cannot be cured. The drugs used have different degrees of dependence and drug resistance, and the adverse reactions are greater ^[6]. Traditional Chinese medicine treats the disease with good treatment and small adverse reactions, and obvious advantages ^[7].

2. Cause and Pathogenesis

While narcolepsy is not explicitly named in classical Chinese medical texts, its core clinical manifestations align with traditional diagnostic categories such as "Duo Mei" (somnia), "Fan Zui" (food drunkenness), "Shi Shui" (drowsiness), "Shi Wo" (lethargy with desire to lie down), "Shan Mian" (propensity to sleep), and "Dan Yu Mei" (lethargy with only a desire to sleep). The earliest classical descriptions of symptoms resembling narcolepsy appear in the *Ling Shu · Da Huo Lun* (Spiritual Pivot, Chapter on Great Confusion): "What causes a person to sleep excessively?" Qibo replied: "This person has a large intestine and stomach, and dampness in the skin, causing the flesh to be uncoordinated. A large intestine and stomach cause the Defensive Qi (Wei Qi) to remain longer; dampness in the skin and lack of coordination in the flesh cause its movement to slow... Therefore, if the intestine and stomach are large, Defensive Qi moves and lingers longer; if the skin is damp and the flesh uncoordinated, its movement is slow. Lingering in the Yin for a long time, the Qi fails to clear [the orifices], resulting in a desire to close the eyes, hence excessive sleep."

The same chapter also states: "A sudden onset of excessive sleepiness... is due to pathogenic Qi lingering in the Upper Jiao, causing it to become blocked and impassable. After eating or drinking broth, Defensive Qi remains lodged in the Yin and fails to circulate, thus resulting in sudden sleepiness."

The <u>Du Yi Sui Bi · Qi Xue Jing Shen Lun</u> (Reading Notes in Medicine: On Qi, Blood, Essence, and Spirit) elaborates on the nature of Wei Qi: "Defensive Qi is hot Qi. The reason the muscles can be warmed and water and grains can be transformed is due to the functional activity of Defensive Qi." Furthermore, the <u>Ling Shu · Han Re Bing</u> (Spiritual Pivot, Chapter on Cold and Heat Diseases) provides a fundamental physiological principle: "Exuberance of Yang Qi causes wide-open eyes; exuberance of Yin Qi causes closed eyes."

The concept that "a diseased spleen makes a person lethargic" is central to understanding sleep disorders. The <u>Xiao Er Yao Zheng Zhi Jue</u> (Key to Diagnosis and Treatment of Diseases in Children) establishes that "the spleen governs lethargy (Pi Zhu Kun)." This is elaborated in later texts: the <u>Xue Zheng Lun</u> (On Blood Patterns) states, "Fatigue, lethargy, and a desire to lie down are due to the presence of dampness in the spleen channel." Zhu Danxi, in the <u>Dan Xi Xin Fa · Zhong Shi</u> (Danxi's Mastery of Medicine · Dampness), observed that "when the spleen and stomach are afflicted by dampness, [the body] becomes heavy, weary, weak, and indolent, leading to lethargy and a desire to lie down." Similarly, Li Dongyuan, in the <u>Pi Wei Lun · Fei Zhi Pi Wei Xu Lun</u> (Treatise on the Spleen and Stomach · On Deficiency of the Spleen-Stomach related to the Lung), attributed "fatigue, indolence, and lethargy" to "deficiency of the spleen and stomach."

In summary, based on classical theory, the treatment of narcolepsy in Traditional Chinese Medicine is primarily approached from the perspective of regulating the spleen.

In pediatric physiology, the viscera are delicate, physical constitution and Qi are not fully developed, and the spleen is often insufficient. As stated in <u>Su Wen · Bi Lun</u> (Plain Questions, Chapter on Impairment Syndrome), "Overeating damages the spleen and stomach." The <u>Zhu Bing Yuan Hou Lun · Xiao Er Za Bing Zhu Hou</u> (General Treatise on the Etiology and Symptomatology of Diseases · Various Pediatric Diseases) further warns: "A child's food intake must not be excessive, as fullness injures the spleen. An injured spleen cannot grind and digest food, leading to heaviness in the four limbs, feverishness of the body, yellow complexion, and abdominal distention." The <u>Yi Zong Jin Jian · You Ke Xin Fa Yao Jue</u> (Golden Mirror of Medicine, Essential Rhymes of Pediatric Practice) emphasizes: "Milk and food are what children rely on for life. The stomach governs reception, and the spleen governs transformation and transportation. Nursing should be timely, and eating should be moderate, thereby avoiding the problem of stagnation. If parents are overly indulgent, allowing milk and food without restraint, then undigested retention accumulates and disease arises." The <u>You You Ji Cheng. Shi Ji Zheng Zhi</u> (Integrated Text of Pediatrics, Pattern and Treatment of Food Accumulation) outlines the treatment principle: "For accumulation from diet and food, promoting digestion and guiding out stagnation must be used. 'Promoting digestion' means dispersing the accumulation; 'guiding out' means moving the Qi. If the spleen is deficient and fails to transport, then Qi does not flow freely; if Qi does not flow freely, it stagnates and becomes accumulation."

When children excessively consume rich, sweet, fatty, raw, or cold foods, the resulting chronic food accumulation damages the spleen and stomach. Spleen-stomach deficiency and weakness lead to dysfunctional transportation and transformation, which in turn generates new accumulation. This dysfunction in the spleen and stomach's transformative and transporting duties subsequently impairs the production and circulation of both Nutritive (Ying) and Defensive (Wei) Qi. Concurrently, undigested food and fluids retained in the intestines and stomach accumulate without being transformed, obstructing the Qi dynamic. The spleen and stomach consequently lose their capacity to uplift, distribute, and transform, leading to the endogenous production of phlegm-dampness. This phlegm-dampness ascends to harass the clear orifices. As a result, Yang Qi fails to ascend, and the brain's orifices become malnourished. The interplay of Qi stagnation, phlegm, and food accumulation creates a complex pathophysiology, ultimately giving rise to the symptom of somnolence—exemplifying the classical descriptions of "a large intestine and stomach with dampness in the skin" and "exuberance of Yin Qi causing closed eyes."

3. Case Introduction

Niu Moumou, male, 12 years old, was diagnosed with drowsiness for one year. Parents replaced with no obvious cause of laxoons a year ago, and the sleep time gradually extended. Diagnosis of seizures at Western Medicine Hospital, but Western medical treatment is not effective. See you: Fasting fast, you can wake up, and after waking up, if you have no external interference, the sleep time can reach more than 20 hours; the whole body muscles are weak, the limbs are heavy, and the limbs are difficult to wrestle flat. Obesity, excessive breasts, eyebrows, beards, and hair color are dark, excessive growth, memory decline, and inadequate attention; appetite strong, extremely love meat, eat more cold and greasy, stool 4-5 days, sticky sticky, delicious and sticky, Great tongue, thick edge

tooth marks, thick and greasy moss, and smooth pulse. Diagnosis of Chinese medicine: Duoyu (Diet Stagnation Certificate). Governance: Dine stagnation, spleen and phlegm, and wake up the brain. (1) Chinese medicine internal orbit: The herbal formula was composed of Pinellia Rhizoma Praeparatum (Jiang Ban Xia) 40g, Poria (Fu Ling) 20g, Aurantii Fructus Immaturus Tritici Praeparatum (Fu Chao Zhi Qiao) 10g, and Natrii Sulfas (Yuan Ming Fen) 5g, which was to be taken infused in a ginger decoction. Additional ingredients included Zingiberis Rhizoma Recens (Sheng Jiang) 3 slices, along with Zingiberis Rhizoma (Gan Jiang), Cinnamomi Ramulus (Gui Zhi), Ephedrae Herba (Ma Huang), Paeoniae Radix Alba (Bai Shao), Glycyrrhizae Radix et Rhizoma Praeparata cum Melle (Zhi Gan Cao), Asari Radix et Rhizoma (Xi Xin), and Schisandrae Chinensis Fructus (Wu Wei Zi) at 6g each. Furthermore, the formula contained Arecae Semen (Bing Lang) 8g, Phorbolus Semen (Er Chou) 8g, Pogostemonis Herba (Huo Xiang) 5g, Platycodonis Radix (Jie Geng) 5g, Bletillae Rhizoma (Bai Ji) 10g, Acori Tatarinowii Rhizoma (Shi Chang Pu) 8g, and Alpiniae Oxyphyllae Fructus (Yi Zhi Ren) 10g. The decoction was prepared by boiling one dose daily in water twice. The resulting liquid from both boilings was combined and administered warm in three divided doses over the course of a day. (2) Acupuncture Treatment: Acupuncture was performed at the following points: Zhongwan (CV12), Fenglong (ST40), Zusanli (ST36), Sanyinjiao (SP6), Qihai (CV6), Xiawan (CV10), Jianli (CV11), Tianshu (ST25), Quchi (LI11), Yanglingquan (GB34), Hegu (LI4), Baihui (GV20), Sishencong (EX-HN1), Shenting (GV24), Yintang (GV29), and Chengjiang (CV24). The child was placed in a supine position. After routine disinfection of the acupoints, needles were inserted and manipulated primarily with the uniform reinforcing-reducing technique. The needles were retained for 25 to 30 minutes, with the treatment administered once daily. Both the herbal medicine and acupuncture treatments were structured into 3-week courses, with a 3-day break between courses. The patient was advised to consistently avoid cold, raw, and greasy foods, reduce overall food intake, and increase physical activity.

After one year of treatment, the child's sleep pattern normalized, and other symptoms showed significant improvement. Treatment was continued for consolidation over the subsequent six months, with no recurrence of symptoms observed.

4. Comment

4.1 Analysis of Etiology and Pathogenesis in the Case

The core pathogenesis of this condition lies in "dietary irregularities impairing the spleen and stomach," which subsequently leads to the production of a series of pathological substances such as phlegm-turbidity, food accumulation, and stagnant heat. Ultimately, "the stagnation of phlegm and food confounding the clear orifices" results in somnolence. The disease location is primarily in the spleen and stomach, involving the heart and brain.

The presence of "a strong appetite" due to food retention and middle-jiao stagnation is not a sign of genuine stomach fire excess, but rather a false manifestation of "a hyperactive stomach with a hypoactive spleen" caused by heat transformation from food accumulation. When the spleen and stomach are impaired by food accumulation, their function in transporting and transforming water and dampness becomes dysfunctional. This disrupts water metabolism, leading to the accumulation of dampness and the production of phlegm. Phlegm-dampness obstructing the muscles of the limbs results in symptoms such as "generalized muscle weakness, heaviness in the four limbs, and frequent stumbling while walking on level ground." As a pathogenic Yin evil, phlegm-dampness is characterized by its heaviness and turbidity. It further obstructs the ascent of clear Yang Qi, leading to mental fatigue and somnolence. The spleen is the source of phlegm production. Accumulated phlegm-dampness combines with undigested food, forming the pathological product phlegm-turbidity and food accumulation. The human spirit and the state of consciousness rely on clear Yang Qi ascending to fill the brain's orifices ("clear Yang ascends to the upper orifices"). Currently, turbid Yin (phlegm-dampness and food accumulation) permeates the body and ascends to disturb the brain, clouding the heart spirit and the clear orifices. This causes the failure of mental activity, manifesting as symptoms including somnolence, excessively long sleep duration, being rousable but lethargic upon waking, memory decline, and poor concentration. Phlegm-dampness, as a substantial pathogenic factor, accumulates subcutaneously causing obesity, and congeals along the Liver Channel leading to breast hyperplasia. "Excessively dark and overgrown eyebrows, beard, and body hair" does not indicate sufficiency of essence and blood; rather, it results from phlegm-dampness stagnating and generating heat, with the heat pathogen agitating Qi and blood, thereby stimulating hair growth. "Inability to walk downstairs independently" is both a severe manifestation of muscle weakness and heaviness of the limbs, and an indication of the failure of clear Yang to ascend and mental activity to function.

In summary, the fundamental cause of this child's somnolence is the dysfunction of the spleen and stomach. Long-term dietary irregularities first led to food accumulation, which subsequently damaged the spleen and stomach, giving rise to phlegm-dampness. Ultimately, phlegm and food combined, stagnating in the middle-jiao and

clouding the clear orifices. Regarding treatment, as stated in the case study's therapeutic principles: Promoting digestion and dispelling stagnation to eliminate the accumulation (addressing the branch), Fortifying the spleen and resolving phlegm to restore its transporting function (addressing the root), and Awakening the brain and opening the orifices to restore mental capacity (addressing the symptoms). Only when the Qi dynamic in the middle-jiao is restored to patency, and the phlegm-turbidity and food accumulation are cleared, can clear Yang Qi ascend normally, and the spirit naturally regain clarity.

4.2 Analysis of Chinese Materia Medica in the Case

The formula Fuling Wan (Poria Pill) from the classic text *Quan Sheng Zhi Mi Fang* employs Banxia (Pinellia Rhizoma) as the sovereign herb to dry dampness and resolve phlegm. In the present prescription, this was modified to Jiang Banxia (Ginger-processed Pinellia Rhizoma). This processing not only reduces the inherent toxicity of raw Banxia but also enhances its efficacy in warming the middle jiao and transforming phlegm. Fuling (Poria) serves as the minister herb to fortify the spleen and promote the percolation of dampness. The synergistic combination of the sovereign and minister herbs functions to simultaneously eliminate existing phlegm and address the root of its production. Zhiqiao (Aurantii Fructus Immaturus) is incorporated as an assistant herb to regulate Qi and soothe the middle jiao, based on the principle that "the smooth flow of Qi ensures the natural dissipation of phlegm." The crude Zhiqiao was substituted with Fu Chao Zhiqiao (Bran-fried Aurantii Fructus Immaturus) to moderate its pungent and drying properties and to augment its ability to strengthen the spleen and reduce accumulations. The deep-lying or "latent" phlegm in the middle jiao (conceptualized as Zhongwan, the middle cavity) is often refractory to conventional phlegm-resolving herbs. Therefore, Yuanmingfen (Exsiccated Sodium Sulfate, Natrii Sulfas Exsiccatus) was added as a key assistant herb to soften hard accumulations, moisten dryness, dissolve phlegm masses, and break down nodules. It purges heat, moistens dryness, and softens hardness. With its cold nature and a complex of pungent, sweet, and salty properties, it can clear substantial heat from the Stomach and scour accumulated waste from the intestines. To achieve a gentler purgative effect compared to the original formula, the more drastic Poxiao (Mirabilitum) was replaced with the relatively milder Yuanmingfen. Its pairing with Banxia creates a dynamic interaction: one is drying, the other moistening; one is pungent, the other salty. This combination aims to dismantle stubborn phlegm through their mutually moderating yet synergistic actions. When coupled with Fuling, these herbs work to eliminate the congested, latent phlegm through dual pathways: both the urine and the stool. Shengjiang (Zingiberis Rhizoma Recens, Fresh Ginger) plays multiple roles: it protects the stomach, assists in transforming phlegm, and concurrently counteracts any potential toxicity from Banxia. Collectively, these meticulously paired herbs target the dissolution of latent phlegm in the middle jiao, thereby facilitating the restoration of the spleen's transformative and transporting functions. According to TCM theory, "the Lungs act as a receptacle for phlegm." The child's excessive consumption of raw, cold, and greasy foods led to dysfunction of the spleen and stomach. As phlegm-dampness engendered in the middle jiao (Earth element), the impaired "Earth" (Spleen) failed to nourish the "Metal" (Lungs). This disrupted the Lung's functions of diffusion and descent, resulting in the retention of fluid-pathogen and obstruction of the defensive (wei) exterior. To address this, key components of Xiao Qing Long Tang (Minor Green Dragon Decoction) were integrated to release the exterior, warm the Lungs, and resolve fluid retention.

Additional herbs were strategically included to address concomitant symptoms: Binglang (Arecae Semen): Reduces food accumulation, moves Qi, promotes urination, and relieves constipation via purgation. Erchou (Pharbitidis Semen, Morning Glory Seed): Purges water, frees the stools, eliminates phlegm, scours fluid retention, and attacks accumulations. Huoxiang (Pogostemonis Herba): Aromatically awakens the spleen, moves Qi, and transforms dampness, embodying the principle that "the normal movement of Qi leads to the transformation of dampness." Jiegeng (Platycodonis Radix): Diffuses Lung Qi and expels phlegm. Baiji (Bletillae Rhizoma): Supplements Lung Qi, promotes fluid production, and moistens dryness. Shichangpu (Acori Tatarinowii Rhizoma): Dispels phlegm to open the orifices, transforms dampness, moves Qi, reduces accumulation, and revitalizes the spirit and intellect. Yizhiren (Alpiniae Oxyphyllae Fructus): Warms the spleen and kidneys, while also strengthening the brain and enhancing intelligence.

4.3 Analysis of Acupuncture in the Case

Zhongwan (CV12): As the Front-Mu point of the Stomach, the Confluent point of the Fu organs, and a crossing point of the Conception Vessel, Stomach, Small Intestine, and Sanjiao channels, it promotes digestion, guides stagnation, harmonizes the stomach, fortifies the spleen, and regulates the qi of the Fu organs. Fenglong (ST40): The Luo-Connecting point of the Stomach channel, it fortifies the spleen and resolves phlegm, settles and descends stomach turbidity, and opens the orifices to revive the spirit. It is a pivotal point for eliminating phlegm. Zusanli (ST36): The He-Sea point of the Stomach channel and its Lower He-Sea point, it serves as a pivotal point of the Stomach channel and the root of postnatal essence derived from food and water. It regulates qi dynamics,

raises the clear and lowers the turbid, regulates the stomach and intestines, and benefits the stomach to harmonize the middle. Sanyinjiao (SP6): The crossing point of the Spleen, Liver, and Kidney channels, it nourishes yin, fortifies the spleen, supplements qi, supports yang, and disinhibits dampness to guide out stagnation. Paired with Zusanli, their combination represents a synergy of yin and yang, as well as an interior-exterior pairing. Qihai (CV6): Recognized as the sea of qi and a reservoir of essence, it is a convergence of qi and blood. Combined with Zusanli, it assists stomach qi in digesting food, raises yang qi to invigorate the middle jiao, and supplements the spleen and kidneys. Xiawan (CV10): A crossing point of the Conception Vessel and the Spleen channel, it strengthens the stomach, promotes digestion, and disinhibits and guides water-dampness. Jianli (CV11): A highly effective point for regulating the stomach and fortifying the spleen. When needled with Zhongwan, it moves qi, disperses bind, transforms dampness, and expels stagnation. Tianshu (ST25): The Front-Mu point of the Large Intestine, it regulates and harmonizes the middle jiao and stomach, separates and promotes the transformation of food and water, and clears and guides turbid qi. Quchi (LI11): The He-Sea point of the Large Intestine channel, it clears and disinhibits damp-heat and regulates the qi and blood of the Large Intestine. Yanglingquan (GB34): The He-Sea point of the Gallbladder channel and its Lower He-Sea point, it soothes the Liver and harmonizes the Stomach, regulating the Wood (Liver/Gallbladder) and Earth (Spleen/Stomach) relationship. Hegu (LI4): The Yuan-Source point of the Large Intestine channel, its action is ascending and dispersing, and it diffuses and regulates the upper jiao. Baihui (GV20): According to the classic texts, "the Governor Vessel connects with the brain." As a crossing point of the Governor Vessel, Liver channel, and all three hand and foot Yang channels, it raises yang qi, strengthens the brain, and enhances intelligence. Sishencong (EX-HN1): An extraordinary point, it clears and benefits the head and eyes, awakens the brain and opens the orifices, and strengthens the brain and intelligence. Shenting (GV24): A crossing point of the Governor Vessel, Stomach, and Bladder channels. Chengjiang (CV24): A crossing point of the Conception Vessel, Governor Vessel, Large Intestine, and Stomach channels. Yintang (EX-HN2): Clears and benefits the head and eyes, tranquilizes the spirit, and stabilizes the mind. Point Combination Rationale: The points Shenting, Baihui, and Chengjiang were used in combination to synergistically awaken the brain and open the orifices, as well as to harmonize yin and yang.

5. Conclusion

Lifestyle modification is crucial in the management of this condition. Narcolepsy has a low prevalence, and patients are often mislabeled as lazy, leading to frequent delays in diagnosis and treatment until the condition becomes severe. Therefore, it is imperative to enhance public awareness and accurate understanding of this disorder. Patients should be advised to maintain a healthy and moderate diet, avoiding overeating and correcting dietary biases. Consumption of cold, raw, and greasy foods is prohibited. Engaging in mild activity after meals is recommended to promote digestion by the spleen and stomach and prevent the occurrence of postprandial somnolence (often referred to as "food coma"). Patients are encouraged to incorporate appropriate physical exercise and increase their overall daily activity levels. Furthermore, sleep health education is essential, guiding patients to gradually reduce daytime sleep duration and implement scheduled, short naps if necessary.

Food accumulation is identified as one of the pathogenic factors in this case of narcolepsy. The child's excessive consumption of rich, sweet, raw, and cold foods impaired the spleen and stomach. This dysfunction in transportation and transformation led to gastrointestinal stagnation and the endogenous production of phlegm-dampness. Consequently, yang qi failed to ascend properly, resulting in malnourishment of the brain's orifices and the manifestation of symptoms such as somnolence and memory decline. As stated in the *Su Wen · Wei Lun* (Plain Questions, Chapter on Impairment Syndrome), "the spleen governs the muscles of the body." Thus, inadequate spleen function directly caused the muscle weakness and heaviness in the four limbs. The internally generated phlegm-dampness further trapped and obstructed the spleen and stomach, preventing them from properly nourishing the kidneys. This disruption in the Earth (Spleen) - Water (Kidney) relationship contributed to the abnormal hair growth. Furthermore, the retained food stagnated and transformed into fire, leading to intense stomach fire, which manifested as rapid hungering after digestion and a voracious appetite.

Research on the pattern of food accumulation in narcolepsy remains limited. This case successfully employed a combined treatment of internal herbal medicine and external acupuncture. The core therapeutic strategy, centered on promoting digestion, dispelling stagnation, fortifying the spleen, resolving phlegm, awakening the brain, and opening the orifices, was modified based on the presenting symptoms and yielded favorable outcomes. It provides valuable clinical insights and a rationale for managing narcolepsy from the perspective of resolving food accumulation and rectifying spleen dysfunction.

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