

Implications of Chinese Medicine's Perspective on "Treating the Undiseased" for the Modern Living Environment

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Abstract

The current condition of the environment is characterized by widespread pollution and damage, leading to escalating social, health, and economic conflicts for humanity. Environmental health is a fundamental principle in sustainable development, and the high occurrence of COVID-19 in 2021 serves as a reminder of the interconnections of human health, animal health, and environmental health, known as "One Health." The idea of "preventing illness before it occurs" has long been discussed in Chinese medicine. Sun Simiao, a famous ancient Chinese doctor, introduced this concept in his book, *Essential Prescriptions Worth a Thousand in Gold for Every Emergency (Qian Jin Yao Fang)*. He emphasized the importance of addressing potential health issues before they manifest, diagnosing diseases before they become apparent, and treating illnesses before they worsen. This concept embodies the wisdom of the Tao of medicine, which encompasses traditional Chinese medicine principles such as health maintenance, the use of medicine, and influences from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This paper examines the concept of "preemptive disease treatment", shifting the emphasis from "treating diseases" to "personal health," and explores its potential application in promoting the long-term sustainability of environmental health.

Keywords: Treating the Undiseased, Preemptive Disease Treatment, Environmental Health

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Introduction

The world is currently in a state of environmental pollution and degradation. Extreme weather events such as floods, heatwaves, droughts, and hurricanes are becoming more frequent. Additionally, environmental hazards are exacerbating social, health, and economic conflicts, and increasing the likelihood of conflicts among countries and regions due to competing interests. As basic survival is threatened, the human desire for sustainable living grows stronger. The question of how to pursue sustainable development in harmony with the earth has become prominent and widely debated issues. In 2015, the United Nations announced the "2030 Sustainable Development Goals," which include 17 core goals. These goals encompass 169 specific targets and 230 indicators, guiding countries worldwide to work together towards sustainable development (Tomáš Hák, 2016, P. 565-573).

SDG 3 aims to ensure and promote healthy lives and well-being for all ages. Despite advancements in medical technology, the shortage of healthcare personnel and the unequal distribution of resources are significant challenges facing public health systems worldwide. For instance, in the United States, healthcare spending accounts for 18% of GDP, yet by 2030, there is still expected to be a shortfall of about one million nurses and one hundred thousand doctors. Healthcare personnel are predominantly concentrated in urban areas, while the population living in rural areas accounts for one-fifth of the entire country (Xiaoming Zhang, 2020, P. 2-9). This is true even in advanced countries, not to mention countries with even weaker infrastructure.

Literature Review

The extraction and combustion of fossil fuels, resulting in greenhouse gas emissions, are major causes of climate change and air pollution. According to WHO data, almost the entire global population (99%) breathes air that exceeds WHO guideline limits, with high pollutant levels especially prevalent in low- and middle-income countries. Research from Taipei Medical University suggests that rapid weather changes not only contribute to natural disasters but also impact air quality, making individuals with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) more susceptible to worsening symptoms or exacerbations during extreme weather conditions (Donaldson GC, 1999, P. 844-849). Further analysis indicates that toxic air, water, soil, and workplace environments are responsible for causing illness or death in one-sixth of the global population. The true total may be significantly higher by several million people, as the impacts of many pollutants remain poorly understood. Deaths attributed to pollution exceed the combined toll of AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis deaths by threefold. Environmental air pollution collectively leads to 9 million premature deaths annually and causes losses exceeding \$4 trillion USD (World health statistics, 2024). Without preparedness and adequate assistance, regions with weak healthcare infrastructure, primarily in developing countries, will be the least capable of coping with challenges. Finding ways to adjust one's health management capabilities in the face of climate and environmental change may offer a path to escape from the world's healthcare challenges.

Over two thousand years ago, traditional Chinese medical philosophy already proposed the concept of "Treating the Undiseased" The "Huangdi Neijing" (黃帝內經) states, "The superior doctor treats before the disease, the mediocre doctor treats when the disease is just beginning, and the inferior doctor treats after the disease has developed." This passage suggests that the most skilled doctor is not necessarily the one who excels at treating disease, but rather the one who can prevent illness. "Su Wen. Sih Chee Tiao Shen Da Lun" (素問 · 四

氣調神大論) mentions "The sage does not treat the already ill but prevents illness; does not address the already fallen but prevents falling. When illness has already manifested, then medicine is applied; when a fall has already occurred, then treatment follows. It's like being thirsty and digging a well, or being in a battle and forging a weapon. Isn't it already too late?" Medical expert Sun Simiao's work "Qian Jin Yao Fang" (千金要方) mentions "eliminating potential problems and treating diseases before they occur." "Han Feizi: Yu Lao" (韓非子 · 喻老) states, "Tangible things often start small; things that last long often start with a few." This advises us to prevent problems before they occur.

"Treating the Undiseased" has three meanings: first, preventing disease before it occurs through self-regulation and health maintenance; second, early treatment of existing diseases to prevent progression; third, preventing recurrence and complications of diseases. When certain signs appear in the human body or when a disease is in its early stages, timely measures should be taken to prevent its progression. By addressing issues early, seizing the opportunity for treatment, one can achieve the goal of "Treating the Undiseased" "Su Wen: Yin Yang Ying Xiang Da Lun" (素問 · 陰陽應象大論) states, "a skilled healer treats the skin and hair first, then the muscles and flesh, followed by the tendons and meridians, then the six viscera, and finally the five organs. Treating the five organs is akin to dealing with a patient who is half dead and half alive" (Maoshing Ni, 1995). The above passage illustrates that a skilled healer can detect signs in a patient's body early and treat proactively, preventing the disease from progressing and worsening. If each stage of the illness is not promptly identified and treated early, it could develop into a critical condition. Post-treatment, there may also be significant residual effects, highlighting the importance of early detection and treatment. Research from the World Health Organization shows that one-third of diseases can be prevented through preventive healthcare measures, another third can be effectively controlled through early detection, and the remaining third can benefit from improved treatment outcomes through effective healthcare information.

Conclusion

Western medicine focuses on treating "already sick" conditions, whereas Chinese medicine treats "not yet sick" conditions. Western medicine relies on diagnostic instruments and data to confirm treatment plans, but many early-stage diseases cannot be detected by instruments, leading to delayed treatment. Apart from surgery, most Western medicine treatments mainly focus on symptom management, lacking effective specific medications for many diseases. In contrast, traditional Chinese medicine can help adjust patients based on symptoms, cold and heat sensations, deficiency and excess, and yin and yang principles. Chinese medicine emphasizes balance and harmony with natural rhythms rather than eradicating pathogens or combating diseases. It highlights functional balance and the integration of human health with the natural universe. Traditional Chinese medicine emphasizes balance and adjustment, which is why in its literature, there is little mention of terms like "eliminating pathogens" or "resisting diseases." Instead, it focuses mostly on harmonizing the yin-yang balance within the body and aligning with the natural laws of the universe.

Traditional Chinese medicine provides theories and practices for managing health, preventing disease progression, and preventing relapse after recovery. "Su Wen. Shang-guo Tyan-jen Lun" (素問 · 上古天真論) states that "In ancient times, there were true individuals who grasped the heavens and earth, balanced yin and yang, breathed essence and vital energy, maintained spiritual integrity independently, and unified their body and spirit. Thus, they

could transcend the limitations of time and space and achieve immortality. This is the way of life they followed. " Therefore, it is evident from this that our ancestors have always prioritized prevention over treatment. Faced with modern complex and evolving diseases, unknown epidemics, and the trend of diseases affecting younger age groups and increasing numbers of medical consultations, adopting the perspective of " Treating the Undiseased " from traditional Chinese medicine could undoubtedly enhance awareness of health management for everyone, thereby promoting health in the most appropriate manner.

Traditional Chinese philosophy emphasizes the relationship between humans and the natural universe, encapsulated in the concept of "unity of Heaven and humanity." This perspective holds that people should harmonize with natural laws and seasonal changes, regulating diet and daily routines accordingly, to maintain balance with the natural world and prevent illness. "Ling Shoo. Syeh Kuh" states that "Humans correspond with Heaven and Earth." This passage refers to "Heaven" as the natural world. Traditional Chinese medicine emphasizes how natural environments such as seasons, climate, day and night cycles, and geography affect the human body. Chinese medicine holds that changes in the natural environment can influence physiological processes, pathological conditions, and health outcomes in individuals. Therefore, both health preservation and disease treatment in Chinese medicine take into account the impact of natural environments on the human body. Therefore, just as plants sprout and grow in spring, flourish with lush foliage in summer, shed leaves and turn yellow in autumn, and wither in winter, these are all natural rhythms of the seasons. We live on Earth and naturally are influenced by the cycles of the natural world. In different seasons, humans experience varying patterns of illness. In spring, when winds are strong and everything is growing, there is an increase in infectious diseases and exacerbation of allergic conditions. Hot weather in summer leads to rapid food spoilage and increases cases of diarrhea and gastrointestinal infections such as cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. Dry climate in autumn can lead to dehydration, dry mouth, dry eyes, itchy skin, and cough with little phlegm. Cold weather in winter makes people susceptible to cold winds, leading to joint pain and stiffness after exposure to cold. Research has found that humans are not only influenced mentally and physically by their surrounding natural environment but are also restricted in their clothing, food, housing, and transportation. As natural ecosystems continue to be disrupted by human activity, when the environment upon which both wildlife and human societies depend for survival is destroyed, people are also contributing to their own destruction.

Modern research has demonstrated that changes in human emotions can affect the nervous, cardiovascular, endocrine, digestive, and immune systems. Many diseases are associated with emotional factors, such as digestive ulcers, hypertension, hyperthyroidism, coronary heart disease, cancer, alopecia, hair loss, neurodermatitis, and depression. Modern medical research has also found that seasonal changes can influence emotions. For instance, during autumn and winter when daylight hours are shorter and the weather is colder, individuals who are sensitive to environmental and climatic changes may experience low mood, fatigue, increased sleepiness, and loss of interest in activities. Depression is more likely to occur during the winter season.

"Soo Wuhn. Shung-goo Tyan-jen Lun" (素問 · 上古天真論) indicate that "In ancient times, those who knew the Dao followed yin and yang and harmonized with techniques." This means that to achieve longevity and health, one must harmonize with the natural changes of yin and yang. And also choosing methods of physical exercise that suit one's own body. Lack of physical activity is a major risk factor for non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and deaths

globally (LIU Jing et al., 2021, P. 1402-1411). Regular physical activity reduces the risk of various cancers by 8-28%, heart disease and stroke by 19%, diabetes by 17%, and depression and dementia by 28-32% (YUAN Yuan, 2022, P. 1003-1011). If global physical activity levels increased, 4-5 million deaths could be avoided annually. Physical activity helps prevent and control NCDs such as heart disease, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, and various cancers, maintains a healthy weight, and improves mental health and quality of life. Physical activity includes walking, cycling, sports, active recreation, and play, suitable for all skill levels. Housework or physically demanding jobs also count as exercise. However, the global estimates show that a quarter of adults and 81% of adolescents do not engage in sufficient physical activity (LIU Yang & YUAN Ya-qing, 2020, P. 197-203). As countries develop, inactivity increases due to changes in transportation, work, and leisure technologies, potentially reaching 70%. This impacts health systems, environments, economic development, communities, and personal well-being, affecting the achievement of global and sustainable development goals.

New diseases like COVID-19 are emerging at unprecedented speeds, disrupting lives, health, and causing socio-economic impacts. Environmental pollution requires collective efforts to manage, and timely response and adaptation to extreme weather and environmental changes are necessary. Adopting the "preventive treatment" concept from Chinese medicine, regardless of a country's wealth, can enhance health management awareness, such as maintaining regular diet and lifestyle, adapting to environmental changes, managing emotional stress, and engaging in physical activity. Once overall health levels are improved, it can enhance a country's economic strength.

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