

The patient is a 29-year-old female, presenting with facial pain on the left side. The current episode of facial pain began about 2 ½ weeks before the first acupuncture visit, following a sinus infection. The patient reports three previous episodes of facial pain in 2002, 2005, and 2007. Her doctor was unsure of the exact diagnosis, but the patient reported that diagnoses of trigeminal neuralgia and cluster headaches were both discussed as possibilities.

The patient reports "waves of pain", which she says are "excruciating". The pain is all over the left side of her face and temple, but she is unable to pinpoint the exact spot; she says that it radiates in lines along the left side of her face, and that the location changes. She says the area also feels "inflamed", "tingly", and "pulsating". At times, she feels a vein pulsing in her left temple. She reports that the pain usually rates an intensity of 9 out of 10 (with 10 being the worst pain imaginable). During attacks, she often feels nauseous and breaks out in a cold sweat.

Before coming for acupuncture, the patient finished a round of antibiotics for the sinus infection, and a round of cortisone, neither of which helped the facial pain symptoms. She was also taking a saline nasal spray daily, and aspirin throughout the day as needed; neither produced significant or long-lasting improvement. She reported that the symptoms were worse in cold or humid weather, and seemed to be exacerbated by stressful situations (i.e., breaking up with a previous boyfriend, receiving traumatic news). She also reported that the symptoms were worse when she smoked cigarettes, but said she was not ready to quit smoking at the time.

The patient was in generally good health, other than the facial pain. She stated that there was blood in the mucus from her nose, and that her nasal mucus was green, which she attributed to the sinus infection. Her menstrual cycle was slightly shorter than average (24-25 days), but otherwise unremarkable. She had a history of cysts and painful periods while taking birth control pills in the past, but this resolved when she went off the Pill. In 1994, she hit the left side of her head on the ground during a bike accident; a CAT scan in 2007 was negative. During the time she came for acupuncture, she was a PhD candidate and spent a lot of time in front of a computer; she would sometimes find it difficult to do her work due to tearing of her left eye and worsening pain in her face. She talked about how trigeminal neuralgia was sometimes referred to as "the suicide disease" because of the intensity of the pain and the helplessness that some patients experience; however, she said that she did not feel suicidal or think of dying. On a couple of occasions, she talked about her belief that maybe she had done something to deserve this condition, or wondered if she was being punished for something.

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At her initial visit, the patient's tongue had a thick, white greasy coat, and a slightly dark tongue body. It was difficult to fully assess the color of her tongue because the coat was so thick. Her pulse rate was rapid, wiry, and slightly slippery. Her movements were fluttery and she moved constantly, and she shook her head from side to side throughout her appointment.

The patient's diagnosis was primarily wind-phlegm in the yang channels of the face. The secondary diagnosis was heat in the Liver and Gallbladder channels. The treatment principles were to extinguish wind and expel phlegm in the channels, clear heat from the channels, and to stop pain.

At the first visit, the treatment consisted of local acupuncture points along the affected channels of the face and head (Large Intestine, Stomach, San Jiao, Urinary Bladder channels), as well as bilateral distal points for systemic treatment of phlegm, wind, and heat. Points were retained for about 30 minutes, and stimulated after 10 and 20 minutes.

The patient returned to the office 3 days later, and reported that she experienced about 15 hours of feeling more "relaxed" immediately following her first treatment. This was followed by a period of severe pain, and the sensation that the nerves in her face were trembling. Similar acupuncture points were used during this session, with some additions and subtractions to the overall point prescription. The patient also expressed an interest in taking Chinese herbs, so a formula called San Cha Fang was ordered in granule (powder) form, to be taken 2-3 times per day with a shot of vodka. It was also recommended that the patient apply 1 drop of peppermint oil (in carrier oil) to her temple when she felt the throbbing or pulsing sensation. She also used ear tacks (tiny needles embedded on a small piece of adhesive) on various distal points during the night. The patient reported that she ate a lot of cheese, so it was suggested that she limit her dairy intake, which she agreed to do. Finally, the patient was encouraged to quit smoking (or at least decrease the number of cigarettes), but she did not feel ready to do so.

The patient continued to come for treatment 2 times per week for the next 2 months, during which time she reported a significant decrease in episodes of pain. She stated that the severity of the pain went from 9 to 4 (on a scale from 1-10) over the course of these two months, and that there were days in which she did not experience any facial pain or related symptoms at all. She continued to take the Chinese herbs daily and apply peppermint oil as needed.

About 3 ½ months after starting acupuncture for facial pain, the patient moved away from New York City. At her last visit, she reported that she was experiencing infrequent (about once per week) episodes of very mild pain, lasting between 10-60 minutes. Unfortunately, we were unable to continue acupuncture treatment once she left the New York area, but she was very pleased with the results and felt that acupuncture was successful in mostly eliminating her facial pain symptoms.

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