Cancer Medicine
By Mercedes Núñez

25 years ago, seeing a flyer in the local whole food shop, the words ‘finger pressure’ and ‘Chinese Medicine’ jumped out at me. I had had a course of Acupuncture treatments and experienced Qi coursing through my body. Intrigued by Chinese Medicine therefore, and looking to train in a therapy where I could use touch, I signed up. I’d never heard of Shiatsu, but my imagination leapt. During a recent teaching weekend I asked a group of students what had made them train in Shiatsu. The one thing all their answers had in common was the same inspiring theme: imagination. Recently, sitting beside a client suffering the after-effects of chemotherapy, I pondered on this leap of our imaginations, the client’s, the students’, and my own, which made us embark on Shiatsu as a way of healing.

Amongst the Shiatsu community, there has been much debate as to why our therapy and its effectiveness is not better known in the world of healing. This is complex - the answers are many - but I do know that Shiatsu is a powerful healing therapy, and working with people who are suffering critical illness has only served to strengthen this knowledge. I know that Shiatsu can stand, with confidence, not just alongside other complementary therapies but also shoulder to shoulder with conventional medicine.

I am lucky to work for a charity, Penny Brohn Cancer Care, which utilises integrative approaches to healing (1). Thanks to the pioneering work of Thea Bailey MRSS, Shiatsu has been one of its complementary therapies for more than twenty years. The majority of people who come to the charity choose to support their conventional cancer treatment with complementary therapies. A few choose to opt out of conventional treatment altogether.

The most up-to-date medical integrative approaches understand that alongside the conventional cancer treatment they might receive, patients can do a lot more to support their own healing. The nature of that support is exactly what we do in Shiatsu – treating the whole person. We look at how clients care for their bodies, how and what they eat, how they breathe and sleep, how much activity or exercise they take, how they feel and express their emotions, how they nurture their spirit. What is interesting for us, as Shiatsu practitioners, is that this way of supporting the cancer journey now has scientific evidence to back it. What was on the fringes 30 years ago, when Penny set up the charity, is increasingly becoming part of the mainstream in cancer care.

Although Shiatsu may still not be well known in this field, I see that - both in theory and in practice - it is totally congruent with modern integrative medical approaches. As a healer, my imagination took me into the world of Shiatsu rather than the world of western medicine. I know, though the vehicles are different, the journeys share many things. We speak different languages - western medicine might speak of the immune system and Shiatsu of Defensive Qi - but in essence we mean the same thing.

In his excellent book ‘Anticancer’(2), Dr David Servan-Schreiber says that since cancer cells are constantly being created in our bodies, the interesting thing is not that 1 in 4 people in the western world get cancer but that 3 in 4 do not. There is no one cause linked to the production of cancer cells – there are so many factors involved, from genetics to environment to viruses to aging and more - but what keeps cancer cells in check is a strong immune system. Looking after its terrain and discovering what keeps it healthy and robust is the best defence there is.

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There is a branch of medicine, Psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), which studies the connection between the mind, the nervous system and immunity. The autonomic nervous system needs to balance between the sympathetic - fight or flight response - and the parasympathetic - rest and repair response. Our minds, emotions and modern living get in the way of this balance, leaving us in a chronically stressed ‘sympathetic’ state, unable to come fully ‘into the parasympathetic’, the system designed to enrich and sustain our immune system and to keep cancer cells in check.

This western physiological explanation is one that we can easily translate into Shiatsu language: Impetus and Purification. I believe that Masunaga’s Zen Shiatsu theory, an amalgam of Japanese and Chinese traditional medicine and western psychology and physiology, preceded PNI by several decades. Modern medical approaches are now recommending what we, as Zen Shiatsu practitioners, have been doing for a long time. We are part of a rich heritage, a system broad enough to allow our imaginations and our clients’ to converse in a unique healing language.

The science of PNI has discovered that the mind and the emotions have the same physiological impact on the body as actual experience. Apparently we do not physically differentiate between situations that our minds find stressful, such as problems with work or family, and the ancient human response of running away from attack. Whether the stress is real or imagined our nervous system responds in the same way and stimulates the release of the same cocktail of hormones and chemical changes in our bodies.

Western medicine is beginning to gather evidence that practices - which we in Shiatsu have been recommending for a long time – such as relaxation, imagery, meditation and mindfulness, actually have a powerful effect on our physiology. The science of Epigenetics has found that these practices can actually switch off cancer-activating genes and switch on cancer-suppressing ones. The theory that our genes dictate our fate is being reviewed. Of course in Shiatsu we know why such practices are beneficial - they cultivate our Qi, enabling us to enrich and enhance the amount we inherit from our parents.

In terms of the emotions of cancer patients, various research studies have shown the beneficial effects on patients who receive the right emotional support during treatment. Being part of a support group that encourages patients to feel and express their emotions authentically, improves recovery times and lessens recurrence. In Shiatsu the emotional body of our clients is part of their whole being and as palpable to our touch as their physical body. Shiatsu often enables long buried feelings to surface. The shock of diagnosis, the trauma of treatment and post-treatment are at the core of Shiatsu work when treating people with cancer. We know the importance of supporting our clients in expressing and feeling what is going on for them. Free flow of emotions is essential to avoid the Qi getting ‘knotted’ causing disease and impairing healing.

A very long time ago, Traditional Chinese medicine described cancer tumours as resulting from Damp, Phlegm and Blood Stagnation. Relatively recently, orthodox cancer research has found that cancer cells use the body’s healing inflammation response, and its increased blood supply, to keep growing. They also make use of the increased blood vessels to circulate and metastasise in other parts of the body. Cancer cells thrive in an inflamed environment. Researchers are looking into the causes of inflammation particularly those linked to western diets and lifestyles - where the highest incidents of cancers occur.

Western medicine is gradually acknowledging that the food we eat is important to health. An anti-inflammatory diet is what integrative doctors and nutritionists at Penny Brohn recommend. This means eating a diet rich in vegetables, unprocessed wholefoods, meat and fish that are traditionally
reared, and to avoid over-eating. In fact, Michael Pollan’s aphorism: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants”, summarises the latest recommendations perfectly. (3)

This is of course what all Shiatsu practitioners know well: eat food that is ‘Qi-ful’, food that our bodies are designed to digest and convert into more glorious Qi! Those foods that create Damp - processed, refined, high in sugar - are difficult to transform into Qi and tend to lurk in our digestive system. Over-eating also impairs the Spleen’s function of transforming food into Qi, creating instead Damp and Phlegm, these slow the Qi, the Blood stagnates and we know the rest…

We recommend supporting the Spleen and Stomach functions by eating with pleasure in a relaxed and mindful way. Western medicine can now show that digestion is impaired when the body is switched into the fight/flight response. Our stressful ways of eating, anxious and worried, in front of the computer, watching TV etc. are probably a major cause of current intestinal disorders such as IBS and others.

Present day sedentary lifestyles are being linked to many of our chronic diseases including cancers, and many doctors are strongly recommending exercise for cancer patients. Studies have shown that patients who exercise can have a higher chance of cancers not recurring than that provided by many chemotherapy treatments. Exercise helps to neutralise some of the cocktail of hormones prompted by the sympathetic nervous response. In Shiatsu, we understand that lack of movement impairs the Qi - the Liver energy needs to move. Recommending exercise and practices such a Qigong, Tai Chi and Yoga have always been part of our client support, in Masunaga’s words: Detoxification and Purification.

We often bemoan the fact that not enough research is being done to show how effective our therapy is. But working with cancer has shown me that medical research already validates Shiatsu practice. This should give us tremendous confidence to continue doing what we do: to feed our imagination with the wisdom and poetry of our practice, to continue our study of the classics of Chinese medicine, the developments of Masunaga’s theories and the attempt to understand the latest discoveries in science.

As we sit beside our clients in the wonderful, spacious, respectful space which Zen Shiatsu creates, we attend together to what arises right now and what ceases to be right now. This is a way of looking at healing which cause-and-effect driven conventional medicine, both philosophically and literally, has little time for. Yet for us it is a cornerstone: the relationship between client, practitioner and the present moment; watching the Qi, Kyo and Jitsu, movement and stillness within the continuum of birth and death; sensing relationships and patterns and supporting our clients to find their own imaginative way through illness into health or beyond.

We might worry and explore as a community how we should present our therapy: Bodywork? Soul Work? Medicine? Craft? But I feel it is all of these - and that we can take our basic Shiatsu training to work alongside life-threatening illness, death and dying, musculo-skeletal problems, mental health, or wherever our imaginations inspire us to go - and we can go there with confidence.

(1) This article is indebted to the work of the holistic teams and service users of Penny Brohn Cancer Care, www.pennybrohncancercare.org
cancer diagnosis. The various research and studies alluded to in this article can be found in this book.