

# Brief Analysis of Treatment of Postpartum Body Pain by Professor Zhang Xiaofeng from the Viewpoint of “Liver Vital Deficiency and Yang Stagnation”

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**Abstract:** Postpartum body pain is a common gynecological disease in clinical setting. Its symptoms are complex and is difficult to treat. It is often treated in many ways but with poor results, which bring great pain to patients and their families. Professor Zhang Xiaofeng can effectively improve clinical treatment of this disease from the point of view of “liver vital deficiency and yang stagnation”. This paper mainly introduces the professional experience of Professor Zhang Xiaofeng in treating postpartum body pain. A clinical case was attached for reference as proof.

**Keywords:** Postpartum body pain, Traditional Chinese medicine treatment, Experience of famous doctor, Liver vital deficiency and yang deficiency

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## 1 Introduction

“Postpartum body pain” refers to pain in joints of limbs, numbness, fear of cold and wind in women during puerperium. It is also known as “postpartum external wind”, or commonly known as “postpartum wind”. The etiology of this disease was first mentioned in “Discussion on the Origins of Various Diseases”<sup>[1]</sup>. “Golden Book of Imperial Medicine—Key Points of Gynecological Psychology” pointed out that the main causes of the disease are blood deficiency, exogenous stimuli and blood stasis. According to traditional Chinese medicine, there are no more than

two causes of pain: first, pain due to impediment; and second, pain due to lack of nourishment. Postpartum body pain is mostly due to the insufficiency of *qi* and blood, insufficiency of defensive *qi* and loosening of texture of muscle and skin. At such, improper sleeping arises. Wind, cold and pathogenic dampness thus take advantages to enter and retain in meridian system and joints which hinder the flow of *qi* and blood, giving rise to pain due to impediment. In other way, it can be due to flow impediment in meridian system, nourishment of *qi* is lost, thus give rise to pain due to lack of nourishment. Traditional Chinese medicine has a long history in treatment of postpartum body pain and has a good curative effect.

At present, there is no standardized diagnosis and treatment regimen in Western medicine. Most of the treatments are focused on symptoms. Clinically, most patients are mainly given antipyretic, analgesic or hormone therapy for treatment. Clinical observation showed that such Western medicine treatment regimen had little effect.

Professor Zhang Xiaofeng is the second batch of famous provincial traditional Chinese medicine doctor in Shaanxi Province. He is now the chief physician of the Department of Gynecology of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Xi'an Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine; part-time supervisor of master's degree students in Shaanxi University of Traditional Chinese Medicine; member of Professional Committee of Gynecology of Chinese Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine; member of board of directors and vice-chairmen of Professional Committee of Gynecology of Shaanxi Association of Traditional

Chinese Medicine. He has more than 30 years of clinical work experience in gynecology of traditional Chinese medicine, his experience is rich. He has his own unique opinions on “postpartum body pain”. His student (the first author) has the opportunity to serve as his postgraduate student, and had learnt tremendously from what had been seen and heard in clinical setting. The introduction of his clinical experience in treatment of postpartum body pain using traditional Chinese medicine is as follows:

## 2 Etiology and pathogenesis

### 2.1 Postpartum multi-insufficiencies and blood stasis are due to intrinsic factors

Women suffer from excessive sweating and excessive bleeding during delivery. Limbs and whole body are weak, meridian system loses nourishment, limbs are numb and pain. Blood vessels around womb of women are linked to kidney. When they have excessive bleeding, nutrients in blood vessels around womb are lost, so they suffer from pain in low back. “*Qi* is the commander of blood, and blood is the mother of *qi*”. When excessive blood is lost during childbirth, so does the *qi*. *Qi* is lost together with lost blood. When *Qi* is insufficient, pore closing and anti-perspiration are weak. Thus body is vulnerable to invasion by exogenous pathogens. When both *qi* and blood are insufficient, meridian system loses its nourishment, thus giving rise to “pain due to lack of nourishment”.

After delivery, *qi* and blood are in insufficiency. New blood cannot be regenerated in time. Old blood stagnates and forms stasis, thus formation of blood stasis. “Gynecological Introductory Handbook— Gate to Postpartum”: “Pain all over the body after delivery, it is because of expansion of parturient bone joints, weakening of defensive *qi*, stagnation of *qi* in meridian system, stagnation of *qi* and blood, distress in bone joints, impeded flow of blood, so arms and feet are unable to bend and stretch<sup>[2]</sup>. “Chen Suan’s Gynecological Supplementary Solution”: “Postpartum pain in all over the body is due to intra-partum injury. *Qi* and blood rise and fall irregularly and retain in joints, thus cause pain in all over body.” “Fu Qingzu Women—Postpartum Section”: “After delivery, hundreds of joints are widened, blood is lost, *qi* is insufficient thus impediments arise in the meridian system. They accumulate and never go away, and eventually reach tendons and veins thus lead to distress

in bone joints.” *Qi* is insufficient after delivery, impetus is weak, blood stasis impedes the meridian system and joints, resulting in distress in joints. This is pain due to impediment. Bodies of postpartum women usually have multiple deficiencies and multiple stasis just as stated in “Internal Classics”: “Where pathogen gathers, it is where *qi* is insufficient”. Therefore, multi-deficiencies and multi-stasis are due to intrinsic factors that lead to postpartum body pain.

### 2.2 Exogenous pathogens are inducing factors

“Discussion on Origins of Various Diseases: Postpartum External Wind Syndrome”: “Giving birth damages blood and *qi*, and injures internal organs. When women wake up early and work before recovery, external pathogenic factors take opportunity to attack body when the *qi* is deficient, thus they fall into sickness. This is called external wind. The pathogenic factors subsequently injure internal organs and meridian system, thus giving rise to various diseases.” This pointed out that after delivery, *qi* and blood are in deficit and vital energy is damaged, thus the susceptibility to exogenous pathogens. In clinics, patients are often asked for etiology of clinical diseases, and most of them are caused by inadvertent external cold and wind pathogenic factors.

### 2.3 Liver vital deficiency and *yang* stagnation are the main pathogenesis of the disease.

Liver vital deficiency mainly refers to insufficiency of liver blood. The physiological functions of liver are as follows: it can store blood and can regulate flow. The nature of liver is *yin* but its activities are *yang*. When *qi* and blood are abundant, sufficient blood is stored in liver. Liver can generate *yang* and the liver *yang* is not excessive. Thus, its regulation of slow is in order, body and *qi* are well regulated and emotion is relaxed and comfortable. On the contrary, emotional discomfort arises when body and *qi* are stagnated and impeded. Ye Tianshi pointed out: “Women’s life bases on blood and relies on liver.” During childbirth, women have excessive bleeding. After childbirth, there is insufficient blood in blood vessels of the whole body, liver stores inadequate blood thus liver vital deficiency.

Stagnation of *yang*, refers to retention of *yang* inside body and cannot be dispelled to the external. “Tracing Medical Classics: The Five Stagnation Theory” states: “Stagnation means standstill and not flowing.” “Huang Emperor’s General Inquiries of Internal Classic” stated: “*yin* gathers at the outside, so *yang* stagnates on the

inside.” Women sweat excessively during childbirth. Their muscle and skin are opened up and thus they are susceptible to external cold pathogens. External cold pathogens accumulate and stagnate, and impede the flow of *yang* in body therefore *yang* stagnates inside the body. After childbirth, *qi* and blood are deficient. There is lack of force to transport *yang*, vital of *yang* accumulate deep inside body, thus formation of stagnation of *yang*. Deficiency of *qi* and blood stasis can easily hinder the flow of *qi*. When the flow of *qi* is not in order, *yang* accumulates inside the body and cannot reach the external. This is the main reason of stagnation of *yang*. In addition, *qi* and blood of puerperal women are consumed and depleted. When blood is deficient, liver is not nourished. While liver can regulate flow, disordered regulation of flow leads to stagnation of liver *qi*. “*Qi* of emotional people is impeded and not flowing.” *Qi* of liver stagnates and *yang* retains inside body, this will also cause “stagnation of *yang*”. With the improvement of living standards, air conditioner has become a common household appliance in people’s daily life. Puerperal women often stay in air conditioned room, so they are very susceptible to exogenous cold pathogenic factors. Also, puerperal women mostly lay and rest on bed. The “Theory of Medicine by Rationalization of Principles of Matters” by Zhu Danxi states: “Sky is moving, because it is always in motion; humans are living, because of they are always in movement, too.” Thus, lying is uncondusive for transport of *yang*. Although medicine can be given to supplement the deficiencies and dispel pathogenic factors for disease of “liver vital insufficiency and *yang* stagnation”, the effect is not good because the origin causative factor is unresolved.

### 3 Principles and prescriptions of treatment

Bodies of postpartum women are usually in multiple deficiencies and multiple stasis. First, external skin defense is not solid, thus the susceptibility to exogenous pathogens. Second, pathogenic *qi* usually combines with blood stasis. Blood stasis is already difficult to eliminate, and it is even more difficult to eradicate pathogenic *qi*. Third, blood is deficient and liver vital stagnates. This cause emotional discomfort and poor appetite which affect the recovery of body. Fourth, accumulation and stagnation of *yang*. Although nourishment of blood can be used to expel pathogenic wind, invigorate *qi* and resolve stasis, and analgesic drugs can be used to promote blood flow for relief of

cold, their efficacies are still very low. It is just like a spark of fire is covered with a heavy layer of wood, how can the fire be roaring? Most clinical patients suffer from pain in joints, muscles and bones due to cold caught during puerperium. With the broad promotion of the postpartum treatment concepts using steaming and moxibustion, patients often have self-treatment which results in wide opening of skin pores, leakage of essential body fluid and thus spontaneous sweating. In addition, they are fear of “postpartum diseases”. So, they close windows at home at all time and leaving house covered and wrapped in thick silk, leaving only eyes for seeing. Patients often seek for medical advice when they have spontaneous sweating, fear of cold and physical pain. As in “General Inquiries—Theory of Reverse Adjustment”: “Deficiency of nourishing *qi* results in numbness; deficiency of defensive *qi* result in lack of strength. When both nourishing *qi* and defensive *qi* are in insufficiencies, body is numb and lack of strength.” When nourishing *qi* is consumed and depleted, it gives rise to “pain due to lack of nourishment”. When defensive *qi* is not solid, external pathogenic factors take opportunity to enter body, retain at joints, and cause impediment in meridian system, thus give rise to “pain due to impediment”. When these repeat all over again, the illness is difficult to recover. In addition, a lot of blood is lost after delivery and there is insufficient blood for nourishment of liver. Both liver vital and blood are in deficiency, thus stagnation of liver *qi*. When flow of *qi* is not smooth, blood flow is not smooth, tendons and blood vessels are lack of nourishment, resulting in spasms in limbs and pain arises. Many postpartum patients often suffer from emotional disorder, depression or irritability, this is because of insufficient blood for nourishment of liver and stagnation of liver *qi*. “Shen’s Women Records”: “This syndrome is mostly due to blood insufficiency, consumption of nutrients for nourishment is appropriate.” If there is numbness due to combination of wind, cold and dampness, nourishment of blood should be emphasized. Low dose of numbness-reducing medicine can be prescribed, but medicine to eliminate pathogenic wind should not be prescribed. However, in point of view of Professor, a small prescription dose of pathogenic wind-eliminating medicine can be beneficial for joints. Therefore, for treatment of patients with postpartum body pain, Professor often prescribe small dose of Chinese aconite to mildly supplement the fire of life, to promote the vitality of *yang*, and to aid *qi* in

transporting blood, in order to improve clinical efficacy.

#### 4 Typical medical record

Patient: Zhang, 35 years old, first medical visit on February 11, 2018.

The patient's principal complaint was "body pain after childbirth for more than 4 months". The first child (singleton) of the patient was delivered by caesarean section at the previous 6 months. The birth process was smooth, she rested well during the puerperium period. At postpartum 50 days after delivery, she went outdoor and caught cold in steaming sauna. After that, she suffered from back pain, low back pain, limb pain in the form of migratory pain, especially in the lower half of her body that her joint flexion and extension are in distress. The patient was first treated with physical therapy and Moxibustion at home. However, her conditions were not significantly alleviated, and were accompanied by fatigue, sweating, nausea, chill and other discomforts. At such symptoms, breast-feeding was still given, volume of milk was fine. Vaginal discharge was normal, appetite was low. Emotional was not good, with occasional depression, anxiety and impatience. Frequent dreams, and constipation. Skin tone was dull and dark, tongue moss was thin and white, pulse was weak. Diagnosis: postpartum body pain. Syndromes: discord of nourishing *qi* and defensive *qi*, stagnation of *yang*, deficiency of kidney vital and impediment in meridian system. Regimen of Body Pain Decoction was given according to the conditions of the patient.

12g of *Angelicae senensis* (female ginseng)  
15g of fried *Paeonia tacti* lora Pall  
10g of *Ligusticum chuanxiong* hort  
15g of fried *Atractylodes macrocephala* Koidz  
30g of *Astragalus propinquus* Schischkin  
30g of *Triticum aestivum*  
20g of mulberry branch  
10g of cinnamon branch  
20g of *Pueraria lobata* (Kudzu root)  
10g of orange peel  
15g of *Poria cocos* (China root)  
15g of papaya  
12g of *Angelica pubescens*  
15g of *Achyranthes bidentata*  
6g of roasted liquorice  
15g of *Dipsacus asper*  
15g of mulberry mistletoe  
6g of *Saposhnikovia divaricata*

6 decocts

Second visit (18<sup>th</sup> Feb): After taking the above medicine, sweating condition of the patient improved significantly and all symptoms were alleviated. However, lumbago and low back pain were still unresolved. 15g of salted *Eucommia ulmoides* was added to the previous prescription regimen, 6 decocts were prescribed.

Third visit (25<sup>th</sup> February 25): Sweating condition recovered. Lumbago and low back pain were alleviated. Joints at shoulders, elbows and knees were still in distress. Chill in patient still persisted. No other obvious discomforts were observed. Based on the previous regimen, *Triticum aestivum*, *Saposhnikovia divaricata*, papaya, mulberry branch and cinnamon branch were removed from the regimen; 15g of boiled *Cibotium barometz* and 3g of cinnamon were added. Six decocts were prescribed.

Fourth visit (5<sup>th</sup> March): Lumbago, low back pain, distress in shoulder, elbow and knee joints, and chill were all significantly relieved. No other obvious discomfort was observed. Regimen was continued for another 10 decocts.

Fifth visit (16<sup>th</sup> March): The patient had low back pain, distress in joints in the form of migratory pain particularly obvious in both knees. It was accompanied with chill when caught wind, fear of cold, mood depression, poor appetite, and thick tongue moss. The patient stopped breastfeeding at the moment. The aggravation of symptoms was believed to be related to the recent rainy weather. The patient was prescribed with the previous regimen without boiled *Cibotium barometz*, cinnamon, *Ligusticum chuanxiong* hort, with addition of 15g of Chinese black aconite slices (to be decocted the first), 15g of Albizia flower, 15g of *Rehmannia glutinosa*. Six decocts were prescribed. Sixth visit (24<sup>th</sup> March): The patient was in good mood. All previous symptoms were obviously relieved. No other obvious discomfort was observed. The previous prescription was maintained.

Subsequently, dose of regimen was adjusted and prescribed according to the patient's condition. After 2 months of treatment, all the patient's symptoms were relieved. Follow-up was done via telephone after 3 months, no symptoms re-appeared.

Note: Because of their special physique and that most postpartum women are in lactation period, they should not be given strong tonic medicine for supplementation. Also, their symptoms should not be eliminated using strong strength medicine. They should be treated mildly

in order to dispel pathogenic factors without harming the vital, and to invigorate *qi* and blood while not retaining the external pathogenic factors. Postpartum women suffer from excessive sweating and deficiency of *qi* and blood. Their defensive vital of lung is weak and their texture of muscle and skin are loose, thus they are susceptible to invasion of cold pathogens. Therefore, it is necessary for postpartum treatment to nourish deficiencies and dispel pathogenic cold factors. In addition, excessive use of drug to remove blood stasis will easily damage and deplete the vital of body which is already weak. Deficiency of *qi* and blood is the root of postpartum disease. Therefore, excessive wind-expelling medicine should not be used to dispel pathogens although postpartum women may catch exogenous factors. It can easily lead to wide opening of texture of muscle and skin, and cause body and its relative nourishing *qi* and defensive *qi* to lose balance once again. Spontaneous sweating can easily occur, this prone to hurt the *yin* of the body. Since *Yin* and *yang* are mutually interactive, *yang* is damaged as well. When *yang* stagnates inside body, strength and movement of body are weak. Further, medicine to supplement *qi* can easily over nourish body and hinder appetite. With the improvement of living standards, many puerperium women take rich and over-tonic supplements. This renders insufficient time for spleen and stomach for processing, so the effect is not good. *Astragalus propinquus* Schischkin used in Professor's prescription has the benefit of invigorating vital energy to cure disease of *yang* deficiency and *yin* disorder. *Codonopsis pilosula* and *Angelica sinensis* have the benefits in invigoration of *qi* and blood. Cinnamon branch and *Pueraria lobata* (Kudzu root) help in relaxing the openings of skin pore, promote meridian circulation and has pain killing effects. *Saposhnikovia divaricate*, *Angelica pubescens* and mulberry mistletoe

expel wind and disperse cold, promote meridian and blood circulation. Meanwhile, the medicines have benefits in strengthening skin pores without closing pore openings so that penetration of pathogenic vital to external is not hindered. "Compendium of Materia Medica": "*Achyranthes bidentata* is the medicine that restores depletion and deficiency of *yin*. It can dispel the effects of alcohol and tonify liver and kidney. When used in raw, it will remove pathogenic blood; merely these two functions." *Achyranthes bidentata* also has the functions to guide medication to go downwards the body, to guide blood to return to meridian system, and also to remove blood stasis without injuring vital. Chen Shiduo said: "Chinese aconite is a magic drug that pull lives from verges of death. There is no meridian point that Chinese aconite cannot reach, it guides *qi* and blood to flow throughout body but itself does not retain in it." Chinese aconite invigorates the fire of life. Not only because that it has the root of fire, it also aids ginseng and *Astragalus* to generate vitality, and can transport *yin*-nourishing medicine and refine them into small particles. Clinical use of this treatment often gives rise to great harmonious effect. Some patients feel relieved after taking several decocts, and they are generally recovered to normal condition after a period of treatment. "Motion generates *yang*", Professor often advises puerperal women to resume activities as early as possible on the basis of adequate nutrition and rest, and to gradually take part in sport, so as to aid generation of *yang* of body.

## References

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