

## **AMC Herbal Medicine Program Introduction and Study Tips**

### **Robert Hayden, OM Program Director**

Welcome to the AMC Herbal Medicine Program. Here are some thoughts that will hopefully lead to success in your studies.

#### **Structure of the Program**

The herb program is structured a little differently than most other Chinese herbal medicine programs. While the minimum hour requirement, number of herbs and formulas, and other learning objectives are mandated by the accreditation commission, the exact sequence of instruction is not.

Most programs introduce the Materia Medica (also known as the "pharmacopeia" or "single herbs" -- here after i will refer to it as MM) first; and cover them entirely for about three semesters before moving on to formulas. This is the most traditional way of learning the material; it has the advantage of introducing the student to the entire MM, so that the individual actions of the herbs in each formula is more easily understood. However, this method has a couple of significant drawbacks as well.

First, the program begins in the second year, which is three semesters in length; this means that the entire second year is spent learning MM and the formulas are not studied until the third year. Meanwhile, the students in their second year of clinic are being advised on formulas to administer to the patients, and when they get to their third year of clinic, they are expected to become increasingly independent in their ability to correctly recommend appropriate formulas. Thus, some earlier exposure to formula study may be of more benefit to their clinical education. The structure of the program at AMC is such that the student learns groups of formulas and materia medica together. While there may be some disadvantage to this method as well (namely that the student will be introduced to some herbs appearing in formulas before having encountered them formally in the MM), i believe this is really a minor problem and is offset by the advantage of learning formulas earlier.

Second, as a personal observation, i've noted that, for most people, the first things they learn about a given subject stay in their memory much more easily than things learned later. For example, in point location class, most students have little trouble remembering most of the Lung channel, but may have much more difficulty with the Liver channel. I decided to make the very first class an introduction to the most commonly used formulas and MM in Chinese medicine. Although there are 150 formulas and 300 single herbs taught in the program, the reality of clinical practice is that there are probably two or three dozen formulas which get used on a daily basis. I decided to feature those formulas and their constituent herbs first, because the student is more likely to retain the knowledge and more likely to see these formulas used in the clinic.

So Herbal Medicine 1 (HM1) is structured around some of the most commonly used formulas in TCM. However, Chinese herbal medicine is traditionally taught by a

structured system of categories, each based on a different treatment principle. This is how all of the textbooks are structured and is a proven methodology for learning. I wanted to retain this structure for most of the program, so HM2-5 uses this format, though still teaching formulas and MM at the same time. Thus the program combines some innovations with time-honored methods of learning.

### **Textbooks**

The textbooks used are the Bensky *Materia Medica* and *Formulas & Strategies*. You will need both books as soon as possible. They are the standard for the profession; although there are an increasing number of excellent herb books available, virtually all of the TCM programs and the board exams use the Bensky books as their main reference. The two books will get you through six semesters (HM1-5 and Herb Board Review). Most of the exam questions in the program are taken from Bensky, as are most of the NCCAOM questions. So get the books.

### **Studying Herbal Medicine**

The study of Chinese Herbal Medicine is basically divided into the study of MM and formulas. Formulas are made of substances from the MM, so the two are directly related to one another. A few things need to be said at the outset. The first regards nomenclature.

### **Nomenclature**

Nomenclature in this case means the names we use when we refer to a given herb or formula. Since this is Chinese medicine we are studying, naturally all of the substances involved have Chinese names. In addition, each formula has a number of English names which have been given to it, and each herb has one or more common English names plus a pharmaceutical name in Latin.

My recommendation is that you learn the Chinese names for everything. The Chinese name is the standard -- it is what all of your instructors know (and may be the only name your Chinese instructors know), and it is constant from one written source to the next. The English names are the least consistent. For the MM, the Latin names can be very handy to know, and are the most precise in terms of identifying the specific plant and the parts used. But few practitioners or teachers may be familiar with these. So we are left with the Chinese names as the best option.

Just to underscore the point, consider the names of just one herb and one formula.

Chinese name: Fu Ling

Latin name: *Sclerotium Poriae Cocos* Wolff

English names: Poria, Hoelen, Tuckahoe, Indian Bread

Chinese name: Xiao Yao San

English names: Rambling Powder, Free Wanderer Powder, Free and Easy Wanderer, Tangkuei and Bupleurum Combination

The biggest problem in learning Chinese names is that Chinese is a foreign language; furthermore, it is a tone language with a limited number of phonics. So many of the names sound very similar to our ears. Also, being a foreign language, it is for most non-Chinese-speaking people a collection of sounds without any meaning. It is easier for us to remember that fresh ginger -- rather than Sheng Jiang -- helps ease nausea. So it can be helpful to tie the two names together: when you learn the herb, learn it as "Sheng Jiang Fresh Ginger" as opposed to just "Sheng Jiang" or just "Fresh Ginger". It may seem to make things more difficult, but it will pay off especially when you want to start memorizing formula ingredients; mnemonic devices become much more easy to construct from the English (or even Latin) names.

### **Categories**

As i mentioned earlier, in Chinese herbal medicine, categories are the standard way in which the MM and formula information is organized. Each category is based on a broad treatment principle (Release Exterior, Clear Heat, Drain Damp, etc), and each chapter of the Bensky books is based on a particular category.

Knowing the category of each herb and formula is CRUCIAL -- especially in learning the MM. At least 50% of what you need to know about each herb is found in the category under which it's listed, and in many cases, the category association is virtually all you need to know about a given herb. Each category has one or more particular tastes and thermal properties and channels entered, as well as general cautions and contraindications (all of which i'll discuss below). If you understand the category and are able to identify particular herbs with it, you will be far along in your study of the materia medica.

I cannot emphasize ths enough: the key to learning Chinese herbs is in knowing the category each herb belongs to. Once you have that mastered, then you can begin learning additional functions of the 100 or so major herbs. But if all you know about each herb is its category, you already know quite a lot about that herb.

### **Combinations and Short Formulas**

If you are serious about learning Chinese herbal medicine, you will need to memorize lots of data. In learning formulas, it is highly recommended to memorize all of the major formulas which have four or fewer ingredients. These "short formulas" are often the building blocks for bigger formulas and make understanding and memorizing these bigger formulas much easier. It also becomes easier to learn formula construction, to quickly determine the functions of an unfamiliar formula, and to write ones own formulas from scratch.

As you go forward, you will see that, while the sheer number of herbs and formulas used in TCM seems overwhelming, in reality many of the same herbs and combinations show up time and time again. Many formulas are related to one another within a sort of "family". Once you learn to identify these common building blocks, the task will seem much easier and your confidence will grow.

## **Materia Medica Study**

Materia Medica (MM) is the name for all of the single medicinal substances used in TCM. Often they are referred to as "herbs", but they may also be of animal or geological origin as well. The study of MM is probably the most difficult thing you'll encounter in the Oriental Medicine Program due to the information density involved. I'll talk briefly about the data involved, then give my recommendations for effective study.

Each substance has the following data associated with it, which is considered necessary to know:

- \*Name (Chinese, Latin, English, etc)
- \*Primary Category
- \*Thermal property or temperature ("qi")
- \*Taste or tastes ("wei")
- \*Channels entered
- \*Functions
- \*Indications
- \*Cautions and contraindications
- \*Dosage
- \*Specific preparation instructions

There may be other things listed in the MM entry for each herb, such as chemical constituents, but these are not really necessary to know for TCM purposes.

- \*Name -- This is discussed above. Learn the Chinese name for everything.
- \*Primary Category -- This is the chapter heading under which each substance is listed.
- \*Thermal property or temperature ("qi") -- Each substance has one qi, which is expressed as a temperature (hot-warm-neutral-cool-cold). Typically each category has specific qi which are associated with it (for example, pretty much all Clear Heat herbs are cold or cool). SO if you understand the category, it is much easier to remember the qi of a particular herb found in that category.
- \*Taste or tastes ("wei") -- Each substance may have more than one taste or wei; the tastes are those of the Five Phases (sour, bitter, sweet, acrid/spicy, salty) plus a few others (bland, aromatic, astringent). Each taste has particular actions: sour astringes and contracts, bitter drains and dries, sweet tonifies and harmonizes, acrid scatters and moves, salty moistens and softens hardness, bland promotes urination, aromatic penetrates turbidity and astringent, well, astringes. Again, each category has particular tastes associated with it; for example, tonifying herbs are almost all sweet. So if you remember the properties of each category and the herbs in it, you can make a good guess as to what the taste of the herb will be.

\*Channels entered -- This is usually based on the function of the herb (for example, yang tonics all enter the Kidney); this information may also vary from one source to the next. So my recommendation is that you not spend time memorizing each herb's channels entered. The exception to this is herbs which are said to guide other herbs to a particular channel -- in this case the channel becomes a very important part of the herb's function and it is necessary to know it. There are not many herbs which have this property, however.

\*Functions -- This is the treatment principles for which the herb is used; for example, an herb may release the exterior, clear heat, brighten the eyes, relieve itching, etc. Often these functions are associated with the category; most of the important herbs have other functions as well which may not be found in the category, so, for these herbs, these secondary functions must be learned.

\*Indications -- This means the specific symptoms for which the herb is used (sweating, fatigue, diarrhea, etc). Closely related to the category and function, it is essential to know.

\*Cautions and contraindications -- What NOT to use the herb for. This can often be remembered by category as well (for example, herbs which release the exterior and promote sweating are usually contraindicated in yin deficiency). Some herbs are strictly contraindicated in pregnancy. There are also certain herbs which are traditionally not used together.

\*Dosage -- The amount of an herb, usually expressed by one day's worth, necessary to cause a beneficial response without danger of toxicity. Some herbs are toxic over a certain dose and those herbs and their toxic doses are necessary to know.

\*Specific preparation instructions -- Some herbs need to be soaked, crushed, wrapped, etc, before boiling.

My recommendation is first to learn the category of each herb and all the tastes, temperatures, channels, etc, associated with it. In terms of what you will be tested on, the most important thing to learn about each herb is its functions and indications as well as its category (see discussion of MM charts below).

The instructors will likely give you handouts during class. These may or may not include the MM charts that I constructed for my herb classes. I do recommend that you use these charts to study MM, since much of the information on the HM1-5 exams comes from these charts. They can be downloaded in PDF format at <http://jabinet.net/herbindex.html>

The charts are in five columns with the name of the category at the top of the page. The far left column has the herb names, the next column the qi and wei, the center column has the functions and indications, the fourth column has the cautions and contraindications and the far right column has the dosage and any special cooking

instructions. In studying for the exams, the center column is the most important.

There is also a handout at the same URL that I use for the Herb Board Review classes on MM categories which may be useful in understanding the different categories and their properties.

### **Formula Study**

Formulas are the basic clinical unit in Chinese herbal medicine; single substances are rarely given. A formula is a collection of herbs which are combined according to the individual needs of the patient, according to their TCM pattern and its treatment principles. Formulas are frequently modified to make as individualized a treatment as possible.

Formulas are also grouped according to categories, so knowing the category of each formula is essential. Formulas may address many different treatment principles, and so may include many herbs from different MM categories. However, the most important herbs in a formula usually come from a MM category similar to the category under which the formula is listed. For example, Ephedra Decoction (Ma Huang Tang) is in the category of formulas that Release the Exterior; its two primary herbs (Ma Huang/Ephedra and Gui Zhi/Cinnamon Twig) are from the herbs which Release Exterior. The other herbs in the formula stop cough and tonify/harmonize.

Formulas have a hierarchy, in other words, which is related to the primary pattern that they treat. One important thing to remember about formulas is that, while they may be grouped in a particular category, they may treat different patterns. So it is very important to remember the primary pattern associated with each formula. For example, Si Jun Zi Tang (Four Gentlemen Decoction) and Sheng Mai San (Generate the Pulse Powder) are both Qi Tonics, but treat very different presentations; Si Jun Zi Tang is indicated for Spleen Qi Deficiency and is drying where Sheng Mai San is for concurrent Qi and Yin Deficiency and is moistening.

In addition, the chief herb(s) in each formula should be learned; often the formula is named for them. And, as noted above, it is very useful to memorize formulas which have four or less ingredients in them; it is especially recommended if you want to pass the NCCAOM herb boards.

I did not make specific charts for the formulas, since the charts found at the end of each chapter in Bensky's Formulas book are excellent. I highly recommend studying from them for the exams and the boards.

Please read the introductory information in both of the Bensky books; your teachers will lecture on all of the important material but the introductions in the textbooks are very helpful.

I hope this information is helpful. Study hard and enjoy the journey!