

Integrating Kampo and Evidence-Based Medicine (10)

Living along with the Patient until the End of the Life

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Although this is a narrative essay which may not convey an objective scientific point of view, I would really like to tell this story to you. This is a story based on a memo written by my close friend, Dr. Hideaki Yamaguchi (working at Tosei General Hospital, Seto, Japan, at that time). I believe that the content of the story is so profound that it will be helpful to all those who are involved in Kampo treatment.

A 24-year-old male developed idiopathic interstitial pneumonia at the age of 20 when he was a second-year student at a university. He had been treated at a large outside general hospital; however, no improvement was noted, and at the age of 21, he was referred to and admitted to Department of Respiratory Medicine and Allergy, Tosei General Hospital, one of the leading hospitals to treat respiratory diseases in Japan. Experimental treatment along with standard therapy, however, did not improve his symptoms and his condition gradually worsened. Because he could not find a new treatment in the respiratory department, he was introduced to my department of Kampo medicine when he was 23 years old.

I treated him with various decoctions combining herbal medicine from the viewpoint of Kampo medicine. His symptoms differed frequently, and each time, he complained to me of his various symptoms, and sometimes, he told me of his life. I answered one by one, and devised Kampo prescriptions. Such a clinical praxis continued for a long time and scarce improvement was noted. About a year later, he died of respiratory failure due to bacterial pneumonia. I thought that I was doing my best over the past year; however, the treatment resulted in failure, and I suffered from helplessness.

One month after his death, suddenly his mother visited me at my hospital. She found a blog entry that was left in his computer, which was written three days before his death, and she brought it to me. There was a written message as follows: "Dr. Yamaguchi come to me with his sincere eagerness to cure the disease until this very end. I am grateful to meet you, Dr. Yamaguchi. Thank you." This statement saved me from helplessness and taught me another meaning of Kampo Medicine.

As a result, Kampo medicine was hardly effective for him. All I did was to listen to what he said every time, and make a subtle change to the prescription in response to his complaint. When he saw my response, he might feel that this doctor was trying to tackle his illness seriously. In every situation, Kampo medicine can propose treatment according to the condition of the patient. Apart from its effectiveness, Kampo medicine can support the hope to live until the very end. This may be more important than what we imagine.

Looking at this memo, I would like add this article to the serial essays. So far, in this series I have described four medical classifications, and a social classification which is handled differently from them.

However, the case mentioned here cannot be classified. Nonetheless, I absolutely wanted to introduce this story because the characteristics of Kampo medicine are well described in this case. As written in Dr. Yamaguchi's memo, Kampo medicine can suggest formulae and prescriptions according to the patients' symptoms. It is all the same regardless of what kind of disease; whichever stage it is in.

Perhaps this is not limited to Kampo medicine. Probably the same thing can be done if you can talk with a patient, and you can propose treatment accordingly. However, Kampo medicine is outstandingly superior to other treatments in this respect. I am delighted to dare to understand the reasons posted here as out of Classifications. I thank Dr. Yamaguchi for this memo.

Postscript: When I sent this essay to Dr. Yamaguchi, the following reply came.

“Sometimes he got questions about life (such as “what is the meaning of life?”). I answered as much as I could, but if I did not come up with treatment plan, it might have been difficult to face this patient. I think that both of us may have shared a little hope”.