



# Experience of traditional Chinese medicine nursing staff from Beijing assisting Hubei in the treatment of patients with COVID-19: a qualitative study

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**Background:** Through in-depth interviews, to understand the treatment experience of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) nursing staff from Beijing assisting Hubei in the fight against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) by applying TCM characteristic nursing, so as to provide basis for formulating more perfect nursing countermeasures for similar emerging infectious diseases in the future.

**Methods:** Using qualitative research method, 7 nurses who were the first batch of nurses in our hospital to support the fight against COVID-19 in Wuhan were selected as research objects. Semi-structured focus interviews were conducted on them, and field recordings were recorded and converted into transcripts. The data were analyzed using the Colaizzi 7-step analysis method.

**Results:** The nurses' experience in treating COVID-19 was summed up in two themes of advantages of TCM treatment and nursing in fighting against COVID-19, and the physical and mental experience of treating COVID-19.

**Conclusions:** In the treatment of COVID-19, there is a lack of ability to respond to public health emergencies; the advantages of TCM care are more prominent, which can significantly improve the clinical symptoms of patients, and it is worthy of reference and application; the sense of professional mission needs to be improved; and the nursing staff bear hard rescue work and great psychological pressure when facing epidemic emergencies.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19); traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) nursing staff; TCM characteristic nursing; qualitative research

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## Introduction

Since December 2019, many patients with unexplained pneumonia have been discovered in Wuhan, Hubei Province. Researchers have identified that the disease is caused by a new type of coronavirus, namely Coronavirus

disease 2019 (COVID-19). After the outbreak, the Beijing Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine Affiliated to Capital Medical University immediately transferred the backbone of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) nursing from all wards of the hospital to the front-line departments for the fight against COVID-19. As of the time at

**Table 1** General data of the research objects

No.	Department	Gender	Age	Highest degree	Title	Years of nursing work	Marriage	Previously participated in a public health emergency
A	Acupuncture and moxibustion	Female	42	Bachelor	Nurse-in-charge	23	Unmarried	Yes
B	Oncology	Female	30	Bachelor	Senior nurse	9	Unmarried	No
C	EICU	Female	43	Bachelor	Nurse-in-charge	23	Married	Yes
D	Respiratory	Female	26	Bachelor	Senior nurse	6	Unmarried	No
E	CCU	Female	36	Bachelor	Nurse-in-charge	15	Married	No
F	Proctology	Female	34	Bachelor	Nurse-in-charge	13	Unmarried	No
G	Oncology	Female	38	Bachelor	Head nurse	20	Unmarried	Yes

24:00, June 17, 2020, a total of 83,293 confirmed cases, 78,394 cured cases, and 4,634 deaths have been reported nationwide (1). TCM nurses have played an important role in the treatment of patients with COVID-19 in the aspects of TCM nursing operations, TCM emotional therapy, TCM rehabilitation exercises, critical care, etc., and have made major contributions to winning this epidemic prevention and control battle. In the face of public health emergencies, the nursing experience of nursing staff is worthy of understanding and attention. This paper used a semi-structured interview method to conduct in-depth interviews with the research objects. After the interview, the data is analyzed by using the Colaizzi 7-step analysis method (2), which provides a reference for formulating nursing countermeasures for public health emergencies.

## Methods

### *Research objects*

TCM nurses in the first batch who supported Wuhan's fight against COVID-19 were selected. The researcher promised to protect the privacy of the interviewees and replace the names of interviewees with serial numbers A-G. Once no new themes emerged in the interviews, the information was considered as saturated. A total of 7 nurses (all female) were interviewed in this study, aged 26–43, all with a bachelor degree, all with a certificate of completion of basic theoretical knowledge of TCM, and all participated voluntarily. The basic information of the nurses interviewed was shown in *Table 1*.

### *Data collection*

A semi-structured interview method was used. Four members of the research team developed an interview framework on the basis of studying relevant literature. The research team studied the relevant literature according to the research purpose, design a preliminary interview outline, and determine the outline of the interview by consulting experts through phone call or WeChat. The interview outlines were: (I) What do you think of the role of TCM treatment and nursing during this task supporting Hubei? How is the effect? (II) What are the advantages of TCM nursing in the treatment of COVID-19? (III) Why did you participate in this task of assisting Wuhan? How do you feel? In order to prevent the interviewee from forgetting because of too long time, the interview was arranged within one month after the interviewee returns. The researchers explained the purpose and methods of this research to the interviewees before the formal interview; during the interview, the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely according to the outline, and use their own words to tell about their work experience; the interview location was arranged in a quiet, comfortable and undisturbed separate room; in the formal interview, the researchers explained the purpose of the interview to the interviewee again, and the interviewee signed the informed consent form. The researchers used the voice recorder to record on-site after obtaining their consent. The interview last 40-60 minutes. The interviewee's expression, attitude and body language were timely observed, and the interview was stopped in time for emotional interviewees, and comforts and psychological

**Table 2** The interview results regarding advantages of TCM treatment and nursing in the fight against COVID-19

No.	TCM treatment effect	Auricular point pressing with bean	Acupoint application	Acupressure	TCM rehabilitation therapy	TCM emotional nursing
A	Oral administration, soaking and washing of Chinese materia medica to relieve fever	Help to relieve fever			Mild patients learn to practice Eight-sectioned Exercise	
B	Diet by syndrome differentiation		Acupoint application relieves asthmatic suffocating	Acupressure relieves dyspnea		Improve patient's anxiety
C	Chinese materia medica treatment to relieve fever	Auricular point pressing with bean helps sleep, and relieve cough	Acupoint application relieves cough and asthmatic suffocating		Eight-sectioned Exercise strengthens physique, dredges meridians, regulates Qi and blood	Improve patients' anxiety and uncooperative state
D	Tea-based drink to consolidate and protect healthy Qi	Auricular point pressing with bean treats constipation		Acupressure treats constipation		
E	Diet by syndrome differentiation			Acupressure treats diarrhea	Tai Chi improves asthmatic suffocating	
F	TCM characteristic technology improves discomfort symptoms	Auricular point pressing with bean treats insomnia			Patients take the initiative to learn TCM exercise	Emotional nursing treats insomnia
G	Chinese materia medica to treat poor appetite		Acupoint application relieves cough		Eight-sectioned Exercise relieves mental pressure	Emotional nursing regulates negative emotions

counseling were provided. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (as revised in 2013).

**Statistical analysis**

After the interview, a dedicated person transcribed the recorded data into a transcript within 24 hours, and the collated data were checked by the main researcher. The data were analyzed and summarized using the Colaizzi 7-step analysis method: (I) familiar; (II) identify meaningful statements; (III) construct meaning; (IV) cluster themes; (V) describe in detail; (VI) basic structure of production; (VII) verify basic structure (3).

**Results**

*Advantages of TCM treatment and nursing in the fight against COVID-19*

The interview results regarding advantages of TCM treatment and nursing in the fight against COVID-19 can be seen in *Table 2*. And the details are as follows:

**Actively play the role of TCM treatment**

Nurse B said: “Many patients had internal heat and dryness. We treated patients according to their tongue coating and pulse conditions, and gave corresponding TCM diet care based on syndrome differentiation.” Nurse E said: “One time, Dean Liu Qingquan consulted and prescribed for

the patient. After the consultation with the prescription of Chinese materia medica, Dean Liu specifically asked to take care of patient's diet. The TCM nursing team immediately understood the meaning of it. *Treatise on Febrile Diseases* recorded 'The decoction has been taken for a while, and 1 L hot porridge was given to help medicinal power'. Having thin gruel can not only nourish the spleen and stomach, and nourish righteous Qi, but also help decoction to better sweat. Sweat should be the best for slightly sweating, and with the moisture on body surface as the best. Obviously sweating will hurt the healthy Qi, and the superficial pathogen will invade (smiles proudly)." Nurse C said: "Because the patient was hospitalized relatively late and the condition was more serious, the effects of TCM on the stability of the condition and fever reduction were quite significant." Nurse G said: "When learned that I was a TCM nurse from Beijing assisting Hubei medical team, a patient took my hand and told me that after taking the Chinese materia medica, the body was much relieved, and the symptoms of fatigue and wheezing improved, and the appetite began to improve." Nurse D said: "The TCM experts also prescribed a tea-based drink prescription for medical staff to improve their own righteous qi and keep the virus away from us.

### **Inheriting TCM characteristic nursing**

In the treatment of patients with COVID-19, the nurses of the TCM medical team played their own advantages, used the theory of TCM system to target the clinical classification of different patients, provided treatment based on syndrome differentiation, and used auricular point pressing with bean, acupressure, acupoint application, and TCM emotional therapy and TCM rehabilitation exercises, which have played a great role of TCM. Nurse C said: "We gave corresponding TCM operations according to the patient's symptoms. Auricular point pressing with bean can help sleep and regulate cough and other symptoms; acupoint application can relieve symptoms such as cough and wheezing; Eight-sectioned Exercise can strengthen physical fitness, dredge the meridians and regulate Qi and blood." Nurse F said: "The first patient admitted to the department has a treatment cycle of 65 days. At that time, the patient was in a very serious condition. After treatment and care of Chinese and Western medicine, he was discharged from the hospital. At that time, the patient infected the whole family, leading to anxiety, insomnia, and psychological pressure. We enlightened her by chatting with successful cases, and cooperated with auricular point

pressing with bean. From the beginning, the patient slept for 2 to 3 hours and increased to 4 to 5 hours later." Nurse D said: "There was a patient with constipation. What she described as sheep feces. The defecation medicine didn't work. We taught her acupressure and gave auricular point pressing with bean at the same time. Later, the patient complained that it could be discharged smoothly." Nurse G said: "Isolation wards can easily cause psychological and physical discomforts to patients. We apply TCM emotional nursing, and adjust the mental state of patients with the therapy of one kind of emotion pressing other emotion and psychotherapy of changing emotion." Nurse B said: "For critically ill patients, the disease is mainly due to plague toxin blocking lung syndrome. We gave the patients acupressure and acupoint application to relieve symptoms such as wheezing."

### ***The physical and mental experience of treating patients with COVID-19***

The interview results regarding the physical and mental experience of treating patients with COVID-19 can be seen in *Table 3*. And the details are as follows:

#### **A sense of responsibility to serve the society and a sense of professional mission**

All the interviewees involved in supporting to fight against COVID-19 said that this expedition was the responsibility. As long as the CPC and the people need them, they will answer the call to service, and fight to win! All the nursing staff showed selflessness, and they gave up their little family for everyone, and the sense of mission and responsibility of saving the dead and healing the wounded spontaneously emerged. Nurse G said: "As a qualified medical worker, we not only need the thoroughness and meticulousness of 'with the breeze it sneaks into the tranquil night and nurtures every spring life spontaneously and silently', but also the fearlessness and responsibility of 'great love without borders, mind the universe'. A warrior who fought desperately against illnesses and became an angel of inheritance of TCM nursing is my choice of youth without complaints and regrets!"

#### **Remote support and treatment pressure cause physical and mental fatigue**

Public health emergencies threaten people's lives and health. Facing the outbreak of COVID-19, the majority of nursing staff have no hesitation and go retrograde. Due

**Table 3** The interview results regarding the physical and mental experience of treating patients with COVID-19

No.	Sense of responsibility Sense of mission	Sever epidemic is developing rapidly, with high pressure	Unfixed staff and language communication barriers	Discomfort caused by wearing protective clothing
A	Take the initiative to go	Fill the ward in one day	Poor communication, guesses by gestures	My clothes were soaked every time I left the ward
B	Members of the hospital emergency team, sign up when seeing the notice		Difficulty in communication, do not understand dialect	Short breath in protective clothing even when not moving
C	Experienced, and should go to the front line	Heal and support each other with the patient		Pressure injuries when wearing masks and goggles
D	They say we are heroes, but it's our duty	The first time I entered the ward, I was nervous and my hands were shaking	Do not understand local dialect, and try to communicate	
E	Be proud of my profession	After 40 days of supporting work, I felt unwell and tired of shift		
F	Choosing this profession is to save lives	Frequent insomnia in the first month in Wuhan	Unfamiliar with working environment, caught off guard	Can't breathe in protective clothing, finger pulse oxygen was only 92%
G	Be a warrior who fights the disease to the death			Wear diapers at work

to the severity of the epidemic, the rapid development of the disease, the change of the working environment, the unfixed staff, the language communication barrier, and the discomfort caused by wearing protective clothing, the nursing staff were stressed and physically and mentally exhausted. Nurse B said: "You will be suffocated while wearing protective clothing even when not moving. Wearing goggles is foggy at the beginning, and you can only look out through the cracks when you work." Nurse F said: "I am not familiar with the environment, personnel, and equipment of the supporting hospital. You feel unprepared at work." Nurse B said: "Communication is difficult, and I cannot understand dialects." Nurse A said: "There are 50 patients in one ward, 6 nurses in day shift, 4 nurses in night shift, and there are many early-stage critically ill patients. It is super busy."

**Discussion**

*Give full play to the characteristics of TCM to fight against COVID-19*

In the treatment of COVID-19, in the absence of a vaccine, the treatment rate of TCM is as high as over 90% (4). In the "Jiangxia Mobile Cabin Hospital TCM Mode", during the

26 days' operation, a total of 564 patients with COVID-19 were admitted, and 394 were cured and discharged. None of the cases became severe, and the conversion rate of severe cases was 0% (5). The full use of TCM characteristic therapies not only allows mild patients to be cured and discharged quickly, but also achieves the good performance of "six zeros": zero death, zero conversion to severe, zero conversion to positive, zero turnaround, zero infection, and zero complaints (5). Academician Zhang Boli stated that in the process of diagnosis and treatment, it was found that the combination of Chinese and Western medicine has a definite effect in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 (6). The treatment plan conducts TCM syndrome differentiation analysis according to the development law of patients in different periods, and pays attention to syndrome differentiation and treatment. Great importance is also paid to the principles of correspondence between man and universe for disease differentiation and syndrome differentiation (7). As a cultural treasure, TCM plays a key role in the prevention and treatment of the fight against SARS and the fight against COVID-19. TCM is fully involved in the whole process of diagnosis and treatment, effectively reducing the incidence of mild patients turning into severe and critical, and increasing the cure rate.

### Discussion on the advantages of TCM in the treatment of patients with COVID-19

Through discussion with interviewers, it was found that the specific performance of TCM characteristic nursing in the treatment of COVID-19 is more prominent in the respiratory tract (fever, coughing and sputum, wheezing), digestive tract (poor appetite, abdominal distension, loose stools, constipation), fatigue, and rehabilitation.

COVID-19 belongs to the category of “plague” and “epidemic disease” of TCM. The most common symptoms are: fever (78.9%) and cough (67.7%) (8). In the early stage of COVID-19, the symptoms of TCM are severe fever and mild aversion to cold, mainly due to contraction of pathogenic Qi, and the fight between healthy Qi and pathogenic Qi leads to fever (7). TCM nursing pays more attention to the changes in body fluid, Yang Qi and sweating degree when the patient has fever. TCM operations have significantly improved the symptoms of patients with COVID-19, especially fever symptoms (9). The application of auricular point pressing with bean, scraping, cupping and other TCM operations can more effectively reduce fever (10). The characteristic of TCM nursing is syndrome differentiation nursing, and it is also the essence of TCM nursing. According to the *Beijing COVID-19 TCM Nursing Program (Trial)* compiled by Hao Li and other experts (11), it meets the prerequisites of infectious disease protection and conducts syndrome differentiation. In the future, patients with fever should pay attention to oral care and use *Flos Lonicerae* as a gargle; take Chinese materia medica frequently, and have a bowl of hot porridge after taking it to help the medicinal power; when the fever is too hot, physical cooling or TCM soaking and washing can be applied. It can also be combined with acupoint application, auricular point pressing with bean, scraping, cupping and other TCM operations, with better curative effect.

In the development of COVID-19, coughing and sputum is the main symptom, and the cough is mainly due to adverse rising of lung Qi, which fails to diffusion, purification and descending (7). Acupoint application is effective in respiratory diseases (12,13). Feishu (BL13), Dingchuan (EX-B1), Gaohuang (BL43), Danzhong (RN17) acupoints can be selected (11), and they can effectively treat cough, expectoration, shortness of breath or dyspnea, wheezing, etc., and reduce the level of inflammation (14,15). Tai Chi, a traditional exercise of TCM, can strengthen the force of the respiratory muscles and improve the symptoms of asthma and suffocation (16).

The gastrointestinal symptoms in patients with

COVID-19 are mainly caused by dampness pathogens, which obstruct the spleen and stomach in the middle jiao, resulting in gastrointestinal symptoms such as poor appetite and abdominal distension. Meanwhile, the lung and the large intestine are interior-exteriorly related, and the lung's function of purification and descending is ineffective, leading to dysfunction of the large intestine, as well as loose stools or constipation. For the treatment of poor appetite and abdominal distension, acupoint application can be given at Zhongwan (RN12), Weishu (BL21) and other acupoints; for loose stools, acupressure can be given at Zusanli (ST36), Zhongwan (RN12), Guanyuan (RN4) and other acupoints (17). TCM has rich experience and academic achievements in the treatment of constipation. Abdominal massage often takes Tianshu (ST25) and Guanyuan (RN4). Clockwise and counterclockwise massage can effectively relieve constipation (18); acupressure is one of the common nursing techniques in TCM, which can promote gastrointestinal peristalsis, promote defecation, and reduce the occurrence of constipation (19,20). For patients with COVID-19 with gastrointestinal symptoms and damage to the spleen and stomach, dietary care is essential. It should ensure the required nutrients, but cannot increase the burden on the digestive system. It is advisable to cooperate with medicine and food. It should be moderate in eating instead of overeating. Patient should intake light diet instead of greasy food, and food should be moist but avoid cold, tonic but avoid dryness, and pungent but avoid spicy (21), to ensure nutritional requirements, improve self-immunity, and help “strengthen the healthy Qi and eliminate pathogenic Qi.”

For the symptoms of fatigue caused by COVID-19, studies have shown (22,23) that the TCM traditional Qigong Eight-sectioned Exercise can improve exercise endurance, promote Qi movement and blood circulation, regulate internal organs, and effectively relieve patients' fatigue, muscle aches and other symptoms. Based on the basic characteristics of TCM “holistic concept” and “syndrome differentiation and treatment”, TCM nursing technology varies from person to person on the basis of basic nursing, fully embodying the characteristics of “syndrome differentiation and treatment”. Coupled with syndrome differentiation and nursing, it is widely recognized by patients. TCM nursing staff who supports Wuhan also used professional TCM experience to explain the concept of TCM treatment, the methods of taking Chinese materia medica. TCM emotional therapies of the therapy of one kind of emotion pressing other emotion,

**Table 4** Interview conclusion

Feelings	Recommendations
Lack of ability to respond to public health emergencies	Formulate emergency plans and improve management mechanisms; strengthen training of emergency disaster rescue nursing knowledge and skills
TCM nursing has great advantages	Improve the level of TCM nursing and carry forward TCM nursing knowledge
Professional mission needs to be improved	Improve the social status of nursing; increase opportunities for further studies; increase wages and benefits; increase nursing topics
Faced with a sudden epidemic, the rescue work is severe and psychological pressure is great	Care and support the construction of nursing team; strengthen the psychological counseling of emergency management staff; give nursing staff a sense of security

psychotherapy of changing emotion, tranquillization method are given for patients (24), and TCM characteristic nursing plays a strong role in the treatment of COVID-19.

## Conclusions

This study conducts interviews with 7 front-line TCM nurses found that nursing staff who participated in public health emergencies had insufficient ability to respond to public health emergencies, and their work pressure was significantly less than that of no experience. We should formulate emergency plans, improve management mechanisms, and promote emergency disaster rescue nursing knowledge and skills training; the advantages of TCM nursing are given full play in the treatment of COVID-19. We should improve the level of TCM nursing, enhance the sense of professional mission, increase further study opportunities, and increase welfare benefits and increase research projects on nursing. It is recommended that administrative staff should combine the experience of prevention and control of the epidemic, take precautions, continuously improve emergency plans, strengthen the training of TCM nursing knowledge and psychological quality, and enhance professional value, so as to better protect patients. The interview conclusion can be seen in *Table 4*.

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