

Tinnitus: How an alternative remedy became the only weapon against the ringing

By Peter Popham, www.independent.co.uk

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In search of balance: Independent writer Peter Popham has been plagued by tinnitus for many years. David Sandison

I have tinnitus. I have had it for 14 years. When my ears started ringing, I ran around to various doctors seeking a cure, until one of them took pity on me and explained that there was no cure. I would have to get used to it.

In the intervening years, medical science has made no appreciable progress with tinnitus. When I mentioned the problem to my GP some time ago she confessed that it was little understood and was still effectively incurable.

But it is not something one ever really gets used to. Find yourself in a tranquil beauty spot and the blasted ringing is impossible to ignore. When friends are telling funny stories, you are guaranteed to miss the punchline. The tone, pitch and intensity vary. Sometimes it afflicts one ear, sometimes the other, often both, but it never goes away: from waking up in the morning to going to bed at night it's like being chained to a relentless, one-track moron.

I discovered the Chinese approach to understanding and dealing with tinnitus by wandering into Acumedic's clinic on Camden High Street in north London last year out of curiosity. Not expecting that they could offer any help with a condition that leaves Western medicine baffled, I didn't mention that I had tinnitus. The female doctor told me to stick out my tongue - tongue analysis is a basic diagnostic tool in this system - and after examining it, she asked, "Do you have ringing in your ears?"

In Acumedic's shop window, there is a chart entitled "Which Tongue Are You?" Illustrated are 10 different tongue conditions, from a uniform pink to a livid red with numerous little fissures. That one's mine: "YIN DEFICIENCY", reads the caption. "Hot

flushes, Sweat at night, Insomnia, Irritable, Ringing in the ears..."

A tongue such as mine, to the eye of a Chinese doctor, is stark evidence that within my body and mind, my yin and yang are out of balance. That's bad in itself. But in middle age, one's inherited material and functional energy, known in Chinese as qi, is running down.

As Acumedic's director, Dr Lily Hua Yu, explains: "After birth, your diet maintains and replenishes [qi] and this is then called 'acquired qi'. An imbalance between your organs affects the harmony between blood circulation and qi, and this in turn translates into an imbalance of yin and yang." By closely inspecting one's tongue and taking one's pulse, they obtain an accurate idea of the state of one's internal organs. They then proceed to treatment.

I have in front of me a paper bag full of dried herbs, which include goji berries, chrysanthemum flowers, turmeric, little cubes of white stuff, he haun pi, known in English as "bark of the tree of happiness", slices of beige-coloured fungus and some nine others. After examination of tongue and pulse and a lengthy face-to-face consultation, Dr Lily writes the names of all these herbs out in Chinese characters on a prescription pad; downstairs two women divide the result up into daily doses.

You soak the day's dose in water for an hour, then simmer it for 30 minutes. The smell when it's cooking is nose-wrinkling, astringent, complex. You're left with a treacly black mugful, slightly sweet, mostly sour, and drink it hot.

I had no good reason to suppose it would have any effect, and for two or three weeks the ringing continued as normal. But then, as I continued to slurp my daily potion, I realised with surprise that things had begun to improve. I woke in the morning resigned to the usual relentless racket - and it was different: first it lost its ringing quality, so all that remained was a sustained shushing; then the shushing itself reduced, to the extent that sometimes I was able to forget about it for hours at a time. Dr Lily had explained that the ringing in my ears was caused by an internal imbalance, which the tea she prescribed was intended to correct; now, lo and behold, it was taking effect and my baffling condition was getting appreciably better. Eventually, I would ask myself: am I still suffering from tinnitus? It would take a conscious check to confirm that, yes, there was still this fuzziness clouding my hearing. But for many hours and days I would be all but unaware of it.

Then - because this medicine is extremely expensive: my month's supply comes to £112, and they charge the same again for the consultation - I stopped for a couple of months. And it soon became clear that the tinnitus had not been cured, it had merely abated. The level of white noise rose once again.

I returned to Acumedic and it was spelled out that there was no point in resuming the treatment if I continued my modest alcohol habit: the problem was located in my kidneys, and that organ is close to and (in the Chinese understanding) strongly affected by the liver. So I climbed on the wagon and within four days the bullying tedium of insistent white noise had again retreated, as close to a cure as I dare to hope for. That is the situation as I write.

I shared my experience with John Phillips, an ear, nose and throat surgeon and a member of the Advisers' Committee of the British Tinnitus Association, and he conceded that understanding both of tinnitus itself and of Chinese medicine has a long way to go. "There remains a lot that we don't understand about science, medicine, the ear and tinnitus," he wrote in an email reply. "At the same time, there is a lot we don't understand about Chinese medicine. I can say that there is no good evidence that Chinese cures exist, but I cannot say that Chinese cures don't work, as this is an area where limited robust research has been performed."

He also raised a concept that no-one who puts any faith in alternative remedies would be wise to ignore: the placebo effect, which means that Dr Lily's herbs are doing me good precisely because I hope they will.

But it is not certain that I am deluding myself: witness the trial by doctors in Germany in which a group of tinnitus sufferers treated with Qigong, a Chinese form of meditation, reported "highly significant improvement" in their condition. "Satisfaction with the intervention... and stability of the effects for at least three months underscore the potential of Qigong in the treatment of tinnitus," reported the Journal of Psychosomatic Research.

The Chinese explanation for how one's body works is exotic and unfamiliar, but it has been 3,000 years in the making and is the product of perhaps the world's most sophisticated civilisation. While the West deals with each organ in isolation, and prescribes cures which often have destructive side-effects, the Chinese aspiration is to understand and map body and mind as a totality. As a result, they make connections that sound zany to Western ears.

Acumedic's doctors are careful not to make outrageous claims for their work. At my first consultation, Dr Lily checked my blood pressure, and when it turned out to be high told me firmly to see my GP about it. Nor have they ever claimed that they can cure tinnitus. But then, the oriental approach is the opposite of a silver bullet. In the Far East in pre-modern times, a well-to-do family would retain the services of a doctor and pay him a monthly stipend - but cut off the money if someone in the family fell ill. The doctor's function was less to cure than to prevent one falling ill in the first place. In an ideal world, that's what doctors would be doing still.