Chinese medicine and endometriosis – new study published

A rigorous feasibility study, the first of its kind in the UK, looking at Chinese herbal medicine in the treatment of women with endometriosis has been completed.

Twenty-eight women with a diagnosis of endometriosis, some recruited via Endometriosis UK, were treated at an NHS clinic in London or at a private clinic in Hove. They were given either a placebo or Chinese herbal medicine for 16 weeks. The women taking Chinese medicine received formulations specifically tailored to their symptoms (individualised treatment) comprising 10 to 15 herbs taken in liquid form twice a day.

Those taking the herbal medicine reported relief in menstrual pain.

The trial was randomised, controlled and double-blinded. All women who took part had laparoscopically confirmed endometriosis. The results have been published in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine (volume 17, Number 8, 2011, pp691-699).

One of the researchers Andrew Flower says, “The clinical benefits suggested by this feasibility study are sufficient to warrant a larger, more definitive trial of Chinese herbal medicine. No serious adverse reactions were reported which I hope will ease concerns about the safety of Chinese herbal medicine.”

This is the first time that individualised Chinese herbal decoctions (liquid medicine) have been tested in a double-blinded, randomised and controlled trial.

In 2009 a Cochrane Review of two studies suggested that Chinese herbal medicine may be useful in relieving endometriosis-related pain with fewer side effects than experienced with conventional treatment. It highlighted that better quality randomised controlled trials are needed to investigate a possible role for Chinese herbal medicine in the treatment of endometriosis.

Herbal medicine practitioners are currently not regulated in the UK. Members of the public are therefore urged to only seek treatment from a practitioner who is a member of a reputable professional body. The leading organisations are the Register of Chinese Herbal Medicine and the Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine. A list of RCHM members is available from www.rchm.co.uk.