Danqi Piantang Jiaonang (DJ), a Traditional Chinese Medicine, in Poststroke Recovery

Christopher Chen, MD; N. Venketasubramanian, MD; Robert N. Gan, MD; Caroline Lambert, MD; David Picard, MSc; Bernard P.L. Chan, MD; Edwin Chan, PhD; Marie G. Bousser, MD; Shi Xuemin, MD

Background and Purpose—Stroke is a leading cause of death and disability worldwide. Despite improvements in acute stroke treatment, many patients only make a partial or poor recovery. Therefore, there is a need for treatments that would further improve outcome. Danqi Piantang Jiaonang (DJ; NeuroAid), a traditional Chinese medicine widely used in China to improve recovery after stroke, has been compared with another traditional Chinese medicine in 2 unpublished randomized clinical trials. The results of these studies were pooled and reanalyzed to assess efficacy and safety.

Methods—Six hundred five subjects were randomized in 2 randomized double-blinded, controlled trials to receive either DJ or Buchang Naoxintong Jiaonang. Subjects were treated for 1 month. Inclusion criteria were: (1) patients with recent (from 10 days to 6 months) ischemic stroke; (2) patients satisfying Western diagnostic standards for stroke and traditional Chinese medicine standards for diagnosis of apoplexy; and (3) Diagnostic Therapeutic Effects of Apoplexy score ≥10.

Results—The functional outcome, measured by the Comprehensive Function Score component of the Diagnostic Therapeutic Effects of Apoplexy scale, showed a statistically significant superiority of DJ over the control treatment group (relative risk, 2.4; 95% CI, 1.28 to 4.51; P=0.007). Tolerance was excellent in both groups.

Conclusions—The pooled analysis of 2 unpublished trials of DJ, a traditional Chinese medicine currently approved in China to improve neurological recovery after stroke, shows good tolerability and superiority of DJ over another traditional Chinese medicine also approved for stroke. A large double-blind randomized clinical trial is required to further assess the safety and efficacy of DJ. (Stroke. 2009;40:859-863.)

Key Words: cerebral infarct ■ randomized controlled trials ■ stroke recovery ■ traditional Chinese medicine

Stroke is a leading cause of death and disability worldwide. Despite improvements in acute stroke care—stroke unit care, thrombolysis in appropriately selected patients, and early and sustained antiplatelet therapy—many patients only make a partial or poor recovery after stroke and the major burden of stroke is chronic disability. Therefore, there is a need for treatments that would further improve outcome.

Clinical research performed in China based on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) has the potential of suggesting new treatments for cerebral infarction. Currently, there are more than 100 TCM agents used clinically in China for stroke with the approval of the Chinese National Drug Administration. However, these have limited acceptability outside China due to unfamiliarity with TCM where the concept of stroke is quite different in many ways from that held by Western medicine.

Moreover, there is a lack of availability of the evidence for the efficacy and safety of TCM. A recent meta-analysis of TCM for ischemic stroke only found clinical trial reports for 59 TCM and concluded that the methodological quality of most included trials was poor because only 3 were randomized, double-blind, and placebo-controlled, whereas only 2 had long-term outcome assessments. Nevertheless, most studies reported neurological improvement with little heterogeneity in effect size. Although this may be a result of admission, selection, reporting, or publication bias, it is clear that further large, well-designed trials are necessary because pharmacological studies have demonstrated some TCM to have antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antiglutamate effects. TCM can dilate blood vessels, suppress platelet aggregation, protect against ischemic reperfusion injury, and enhance the tolerance of ischemic tissue to hypoxia.

Danqi Piantang Jiaonang (DJ) is a TCM marketed in China as Danqi Piantan Jiaonang and internationally as NeuroAid. It was registered in China by the Sino Food and Drug Admin-
Table 1. Diagnostic Therapeutic Effects of Apoplexy Scoring System

1-Visual fields/eye symptoms
0 = No visual loss
2 = Partial visual loss due to eyes hung upward
4 = Eye deviation

2-Facial movement/facial paralysis
0 = Normal facial movement, no asymmetry
1 = Partial facial paresis
2 = Complete facial paralysis

3-Lower limb paralysis
0 = Normal movement
1 = Weakness in moving fingers
2 = Partial movement only: able to clench the fist and extend the fingers partially
4 = Slight movement of the fingers only
5 = Complete paralysis of the fingers

4-Upper limb paralysis
0 = Normal movement
1 = Weakness in raising arm
2 = Ability to hold/raise the arm over the shoulder
4 = Inability to hold/raise the arm over the shoulder
5 = Slight movement of the arm
6 = No movement of the arm

5-Toe paralysis
0 = Normal movement
1 = Weakness in moving toes
2 = Partial movement/stretch of the toes
4 = Slight movement of the toes only
5 = Complete paralysis of the toes

6-Comprehensive functions
0 = Able to take care of oneself and speak freely
2 = Live independently and able to do some simple work with some incomplete function
4 = Able to walk and take care of oneself but must be helped partially
6 = Able to stand and take a step but must be taken care of at all times
8 = Confined to bed

7-Best language
0 = No aphasia
1 = Mild aphasia with unclear pronunciation
3 = Moderate aphasia with incomplete sentence
4 = Important aphasia with unclear words
6 = Severe aphasia

8-Upper limb paralysis
0 = Normal movement
1 = Weakness in raising arm
2 = Ability to hold/raise the arm over the shoulder
4 = Inability to hold/raise the arm over the shoulder
5 = Slight movement of the arm
6 = No movement of the arm

Inclusion Criteria
Patients were eligible if they (1) were between 18 and 70 years old; (2) were diagnosed with ischemic stroke according to Western medicine diagnosis standards in China; (3) met the requirements of the TCM standards for diagnosis of apoplexy; (4) had a Diagnostic Therapeutic Effects of Apoplexy (DTER) score ≥ 10 (Table 1) (5) were at the restoration stage according to TCM criteria (ie, between 15 days and 6 months after the onset of symptoms); and (6) provided signed informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria
Patients with transient ischemic attacks, lacunar infarcts, or infarction of the basilar artery system were excluded from the study. Patients were also excluded from the study if they had other intracranial pathologies such as intracranial tumors, atrial fibrillation, other clinically significant systemic diseases, or were pregnant and lactating women.

Stratification and Randomization
In the 2 randomized trials, eligible patients were randomized after stratification according to whether their condition was mild, moderate, or severe, using the patients’ score on the DTER (Table 1). A DTER score of 10 to 13 was classified as mild, 14 to 26 as moderate, and 27 to 34 as severe. Study centers were requested to target recruitment of approximately 20% mild, 60% moderate, and 20% severe cases.

Methods
Two randomized clinical trials comparing the efficacy and safety of DJ and BNJ, a TCM approved by the Sino Food and Drug Administration, in subjects with recent ischemic stroke, are included in this pooled analysis. Two hundred subjects were randomized in the first study and 405 in the second. Both studies had similar designs that are described subsequently.

Interventions
Subjects were randomized to receive either DJ or BNJ, which served as a control, in a 1:1 ratio in the first study of 200 subjects and in a 3:1 ratio in the second study of 405 subjects. BNJ was used as no placebo was allowed in accordance with the Chinese guidelines governing TCM clinical research.

DJ was developed by the No. 1 Hospital attached to the Tianjin TCM Institute for treating apoplexy with qi deficiency and blood stasis during the recovery phase. It consists of a dry extract of 14 components, the 2 main ingredients being Radix Astragalus (Huangqi) and Radix Salviae miltiorrhizae (Danshen). The respective raw materials were processed into a dry extract, which was then used to fill a hard gelatin capsule. Dextrin, an inert pharmaceutical excipient, was added to the dry extract to make up the weight of each capsule to 0.4 g.
Table 2. Baseline Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>DJ (n=400)</th>
<th>Control (n=205)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male, n (%)</td>
<td>232 (58%)</td>
<td>136 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age and range, years</td>
<td>59.2 (31–70)</td>
<td>58.8 (30–70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time from stroke onset to treatment initiation, n (%)</td>
<td>255 (64%)</td>
<td>83 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroke severity DTER score, n (%) Mild 10–13 Intermediate 14–26 Severe 27–34</td>
<td>252 (63%)</td>
<td>63 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n=85 (21%)</td>
<td>n=252 (63%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BNJ was produced by the Xianyang Buchang Medicines Co, Ltd. Both the investigational drug and the control drug were provided by Tianjin Shitian Medicines Co, Ltd. Subjects took 4 capsules after each meal, 3 times per day for 4 weeks.

Data Management

We compiled an electronic database consisting of data from individual subjects in the 2 eligible trials. Data included baseline characteristics, the allocated treatment medication, scores as defined by the DTER scoring system (Table 2) as well as adverse events and laboratory evaluations. Data were checked for completeness and internal consistency with subjects’ records.

Objectives and Outcome Measures

The 2 Chinese studies compared the efficacy of DJ as measured by the DTER scoring system with that of BNJ and also compare their safety profiles.

Likewise, the primary outcome measure of this pooled analysis was the improvement at 1 month in the comprehensive functions score. The neurological deficit score (obtained by adding the first 7 subscores of the DTER scoring system) and each of its individual 7 components were also analyzed. Safety was evaluated by the pooled analysis of serious and nonserious adverse events and of laboratory evaluations collected in the 2 randomized trials.

Statistical Methods

Because statistical analyses in the Chinese studies were performed on nonstandard outcome measures likely to be unfamiliar to Western-trained physicians, we have extracted data from these 2 randomized studies, pooled the data together, and reanalyzed using the random effects model. The comprehensive functions score was dichotomized into 0 versus 2 to 8, which may be compared with a 0 to 1 versus 2 to 5 dichotomy on the modified Rankin scale, although no formal validation studies have been conducted. The probability of improvement in the DJ treatment group compared with the control group was quantified as a relative risk.

The neurological deficit score, obtained by adding the first 7 subscores of the DTER and individual subscores—evaluating language function, facial paralysis, visual symptoms, upper and lower limb paralysis, upper and lower distal limb paralysis—were treated as continuous variables. Improvement in the DJ compared with the control group was quantified by the difference in mean scores.

Results

Recruitment and Subjects’ Flow

In the first study, 201 subjects were enrolled initially. One subject was subsequently excluded and not randomized due to the administration of concomitant medication. One hundred subjects were randomized to the DJ treatment group and 100 to the control group. In the second study, 405 subjects were enrolled, 300 subjects allocated to the DJ treatment group and 105 subjects to the control group. Thus, in total, 605 subjects were randomized by 6 hospitals in China from December 10, 1999, until July 20, 2000, with 405 subjects randomized to the DJ treatment group and 205 subjects to the control group. No subjects were withdrawn or lost to follow-up.

Efficacy Results

The results of the pooled analysis are summarized subsequently.

Effects on Functional Outcomes

Functional outcome was assessed using the Comprehensive Function Score component of the DTER scale (Table 1). The scores were dichotomized into 2 categories: 0 versus 2 to 8. Both studies showed an advantage to DJ and the pooled analysis suggested that subjects receiving DJ were more likely to achieve a good functional outcome at 1 month than those randomized to the control treatment group (relative risk, 2.4; 95% CI, 1.28 to 4.51; P=0.007; Figure 1).

Effects on Recovery of Neurological Deficits

The neurological deficit score was obtained by adding the first 7 subscores of the DTER (Table 1). The trend in the pooled analyses was in favor of DJ, but the result was not statistically significant (weighted mean difference, 0.22; 95% CI, −0.11 to 0.56; P=0.18; Figure 2).

Effect on Motor Scores

The first 7 subscores were analyzed individually. Most of these separate motor function pooled analyses showed an advantage in those subjects randomized to the DJ treatment group compared with the control treatment group. Specifically, DJ statistically significantly decreased the scores at 1 month for the 2 domains of upper limb (weighted mean difference, −0.43; 95% CI, −0.73 to −0.12; P=0.006) and distal lower limbs (weighted mean difference, −0.32; 95% CI, −0.59 to −0.06; P=0.02) as compared with the active control. A numeric decrease in the score for lower limb, facial and distal upper limb functions was observed but not statistically significant. No significant effect was observed on visual and language functions.

Safety Results

The clinical trials reported no severe adverse events and only 2 cases of nausea and vomiting in subjects receiving DJ. Blood cell count, renal function (blood and urine testing), and
liver function were measured and no abnormal changes were observed.

**Discussion**

The pooled analysis of 2 unpublished trials of DJ, a TCM currently approved in China to improve neurological recovery after stroke, shows the superiority of DJ over another TCM also approved for stroke. Functional outcome as measured by the Comprehensive Function Score component of the DTER scale showed a statistically significant superiority of DJ over the BNJ treatment group. There was also a trend in the pooled analyses in favor of DJ with respect to the neurological deficits score. Tolerance was excellent in both groups.

Although the use of DJ in poststroke recovery appears promising, the data from the Chinese studies are not sufficient for an evidence-based medicine recommendation to change current prescribing or treatment practice. This is due to methodological inadequacies in the studies such as the use of TCM diagnostic criteria for stroke, the lack of placebo control, the broad time interval after onset of stroke, the short treatment period, and the use of outcome measure scales, which are different from those currently widely used in international stroke trials.

The use of BNJ as a control instead of placebo may impact the interpretation of the results. However, BNJ is an approved TCM for stroke, is widely used, and is well tolerated. Hence, it seems less likely that the effect of BNJ on stroke recovery was negative rather than neutral or positive. Another possible confounder may be the wide variation in the time to randomization. This may had led to a bias due to patients being at different stages of the natural recovery process.

In the Chinese studies, DJ exhibited a favorable safety profile; there were no serious adverse events recorded and only 2 cases of mild nausea and vomiting. This low rate of adverse events may be due to a combination of the fact that the patients were recruited during their recovery phase when their clinical condition had stabilized and to the method of collection of adverse events in China. However, such a low rate of adverse events again leads clinicians to suspect that the patients selected differ significantly from those recruited in stroke trials in general.

Traditional medicine is widely used globally in both developing and developed countries and is a rapidly growing health system and economic importance. Although providers of traditional medicine seek increased recognition and support, many Western-trained professionals have strong reservations about the benefits of traditional medicine. This conflict between “uncritical enthusiasm versus uninformed skepticism” can only be resolved by improving the evidence base from which reliable conclusions can be drawn on the efficacy and safety of traditional medicine. It is vital more efforts are made to identify promising treatments from traditional medicine in a scientifically credible format. Performing well-controlled randomized clinical trials is the only means to ensure that potentially beneficial practices are not neglected nor inadequately evaluated practices promoted.

Establishing whether potential stroke treatment from TCM can be effective and safe through well-designed clinical trials may be considered a priority because it may then open up the
potential to develop improved treatments based on investigating the active ingredients and mechanisms of actions.

Conclusions
DJ, a TCM drug currently approved in China to improve stroke recovery, has been shown to be well tolerated in this pooled analysis of 2 trials. However, due to various methodological inadequacies, there is a need for a large Phase III double-blind randomized, placebo-controlled trial of DJ and other TCM for stroke recovery before such treatments can be recommended for general clinical use.

Sources of Funding
The clinical studies conducted in China were funded by Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese Medicine and its affiliates.

Disclosures
C.C., N.V., R.N.G., and B.P.L.C. have received a grant from the National Medical Research Council of Singapore to conduct a randomized double-blinded, placebo-controlled clinical trial of DJ in acute stroke. S.X. is a member of the Scientific Advisory Board and a shareholder of Moleac, which owns the commercial and intellectual property rights of DJ outside China. DP is a shareholder and an employee of Moleac. C.L. served as an employee of Moleac until July 2006. S.X. led the development of DJ in China and is responsible for the integrity of the clinical data.

References
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Stroke. 2009;40:859-863; originally published online January 22, 2009;
doi: 10.1161/STROKEAHA.108.531616

Stroke is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
Copyright © 2009 American Heart Association, Inc. All rights reserved.
Print ISSN: 0039-2499. Online ISSN: 1524-4628

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