

The Importance of Clearing Blocks Prior to Facial Acupuncture Treatment

Abstract

Rooted in traditional acupuncture theory, the method of clearing blocks before initiating further treatment is essential to facial acupuncture. A block is defined as a break in, or impediment to, the smooth flow of qi through the body. Blocks can prevent facial acupuncture treatment from being effective, and unless cleared can mean treatment can aggravate patients' symptoms. This article covers the theory, diagnosis and treatment of blocks as practised in the five element style of acupuncture, and discusses the importance of clearing these blocks in order for facial acupuncture to be safe and effective. Also included is a discussion of the feedback mechanism between our emotions, facial expressions and internal organs, and why clearing blocks is vital to this mutual exchange.

Facial acupuncture

For the purpose of this paper, 'facial acupuncture' refers to acupuncture treatment of the face with the intention of altering its appearance. This includes acupuncture used to treat signs of ageing such as loose skin, wrinkles and age spots, as well as specific treatments to facilitate recovery of the effects of Bell's palsy, stroke or conditions such as ptosis.

Facial acupuncture has a rich history in Chinese medicine. Multiple references in the texts dating back as far as 1121 BCE describe herbal and dietary formulations and techniques for rejuvenating the skin.¹ The *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (Divine Farmer's Materia Medica, 221-264 BCE), for example, documented several herbs for rejuvenating the skin, and Sun Si Miao (581-682 AD) included *mei rong* (cosmetology) herbal formulas as well as acupuncture and moxibustion treatments for cosmetic enhancement in his texts. During the Song dynasty (960-1280 CE), the *Zhen Jiu Zhi Shen Jing* (*Life Promoting and Prevention Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion*) by Wang Wei-Yi discussed specific acupuncture points for facial rejuvenation. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE), texts such as *Materia Medica (Ben Cao Gang Mu)* by Li Shi-Zhen and the *Great Compendium of Acupuncture and Moxibustion (Zhen Jiu Da Cheng)* by Yang Ji-Zhou further discussed treatments for eyes, lips and complexion. In modern times the practice of facial acupuncture has become popular to achieve a youthful appearance while maintaining a natural look.^{2,3}

Facial acupuncture methodology

Facial acupuncture typically involves a combination of needles placed in acupuncture points on the face and body, and utilises empirical points, motor points, intradermal needles, threading of needles through wrinkles and/or underneath muscles. For certain conditions scalp acupuncture is employed. Some points are used to bring qi and blood to the face, others are used to regulate yin and yang and treat excess/deficiency. Techniques such as skin threading can be used to increase collagen or rejuvenate atrophied muscles.⁴ In addition to cosmetic applications, facial acupuncture has many benefits for neuromuscular conditions such as Bell's palsy, stroke and ptosis of the eyelid.⁵ From a Chinese medicine perspective, the common thread in all of these treatments is the intention to bring qi and blood to the face and facial muscles. The face is the most yang area of the body and the channels of all the fu organs converge on the face. Conditions such as wind, cold, damp, heat and dryness can all be diagnosed and treated through the face and neck.

Facial acupuncture safety

Facial acupuncture is a specialised skill within the realm of acupuncture, and the only subspecialty for which the American Acupuncture Council requires separate certification.⁶ This is due to the risk of facial acupuncture aggravating conditions such as high blood pressure, or triggering others, such

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Keywords:
Facial acupuncture, cosmetic acupuncture, facial rejuvenation, Chinese medicine, five element acupuncture

as migraine. As one of the few certified instructors of facial acupuncture in the United States, it has been my experience that clearing blocks before treating patients with facial acupuncture is important to reduce the risk of adverse side effects. One concern with facial acupuncture is the risk of needle shock - a syndrome which occurs in about five per cent of acupuncture patients. This presents as general malaise, cold perspiration, nausea, and in extreme situations, loss of consciousness.⁷ A typical facial acupuncture session involves upwards of 30 needles in the face and head, making a vasovagal response more likely. Using the analogy of a river, by clearing branches and twigs that impede the flow of water downstream, the river will flow more smoothly and is less likely to overflow its banks under increased rainfall. In a similar way, clearing blocks prior to facial treatment allows qi and blood in the channels to flow smoothly, preventing any sudden pathological shifts of energy, and thus reduces the risk of needle shock.

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Blocks

In the five element acupuncture style popularised by J.R. Worsley, a block is defined as 'a break in, or impediment to, the smooth flow of Qi.'⁸ Blocks can prevent treatments from being effective or from holding, or as mentioned above, can cause aggravation of symptoms. The *Ling Shu* (Miraculous Pivot) teaches us, 'Only when the stagnation is cleared away can the channels be vented and Yin and Yang be harmonized.'⁹ Facial acupuncture treatment, whether it for cosmetic or functional (i.e. neuromuscular) purposes, is based on the principle of directing qi and blood up to the face, and promoting circulation. If qi and blood cannot flow smoothly through the points, channels and muscles of the face, facial treatment will not be as effective and health will be compromised.

Blocks are diagnosed in various ways. Some show up on the pulses as a disparity in the strength of one pulse in relation to another or in the strength of the left side pulses to the right (see below). Other blocks manifest primarily in a patient's physical or psycho-emotional state. In some instances, a patient's history can be indicative of a potential block, for example physical injury, emotional trauma and drug or alcohol abuse. Blocks vary in severity and significance. Some are dire and require immediate attention, while others are less severe and merely resurface from time to time to cause troublesome symptoms. The

list of blocks below shows the order of treatment priority if they are present:

Possession (internal/external demons)*
 Aggressive energy
 Husband-wife*
 Entry-exit (E/E)

*Given the focus of this paper, I only briefly discuss possession & husband-wife imbalance, as they are not as clinically significant to cosmetic acupuncture as the other blocks. That said, although I do not often see these blocks in prospective cosmetic patients, some patients come for treatment because they are despondent and struggling with life; they hope that if they fix their face, it will fix their life. For this reason it is important to be able to recognise these imbalances. For detailed information on the diagnosis and treatment of these blocks please refer to *The Clinical Practice of Chinese Medicine*¹⁰ or *Five Element Constitutional Acupuncture*.¹¹

Emotions and the face

Before discussing the diagnosis and treatment of blocks, it is important to understand the importance of the emotions in Chinese medicine. Emotional health is an integral part of Chinese Medicine. In *Su Wen* Chapter 8 the organs are portrayed in terms of their mental, emotional and spiritual functions.¹² When emotions are prolonged, intense or unexpressed, they inhibit the normal flow of qi. One of the most common causes of disease is the obstruction of the flow of qi caused by unexpressed emotions.

There is a feedback system between the face, the emotions and the internal organs that is intrinsic to the appearance of the face and the underlying health of the internal organs. Numerous studies have demonstrated the feedback system between facial expressions and emotions; that is, if a person merely arranges their face into a certain expression, they will feel the corresponding emotion.¹³ In other words, emotions work from the outside in, as well as the inside out - i.e. happiness may be as simple as 'putting on a smile'. Conversely, an individual who cannot or does not express emotions through their facial expressions will not feel the emotion as fully. For example, an experiment involving the use of Botox to paralyse the facial muscles involved in frowning identified a decrease of depressive symptoms in patients.¹⁴ Other studies suggest that facial feedback modulates the neural processing of emotions.^{15,16} Habitual patterns of expression get lodged in the face, and the associated repressed or excessive emotions affect our organs. It is a two-way system with feedback from the face to the internal organs and vice versa. Clearing blocks is therefore essential to ensure the free flow of emotions to and from the face, hence, facial acupuncture can play an important role in promoting health.

There are over 60 acupuncture points on the face. Any impediment to qi and blood flow in the points and channels of the face will translate to diminished function - both physical and emotional. That is, if the qi flow in our face is blocked and we do not or cannot express an emotion with our face, we will not feel it as fully. According to the *Su Wen*, 'in order to make all acupuncture thorough and effective one must first cure the spirit.'¹⁷ The associations

between the internal organs, the emotions and the face are as follows:

Heart

Injured by excessive or lack of joy
 Emotional symptoms of imbalance: depression, lack of enthusiasm
 Weakened Heart function can lead to facial swelling and puffiness
 Heart blood deficiency can lead to wrinkles due to dryness
 Heart fire can cause facial redness and blemishes
 Disturbed shen can lead to poor sleep, causing dark eye circles and puffiness
 Excessive smiling can cause crow's feet & deep nasolabial folds

Lungs

Injured by grief
 Emotional symptoms of imbalance: excessive sadness, detachment
 The Lungs control the skin (including opening/closing of the pores); impairment can lead to dryness and wrinkles or acne
 Frowning (due to grief) can cause 'marionette' lines (from corner of mouth to jaw)

Liver

Injured by anger
 Emotional symptoms of imbalance: frustration, moodiness, explosive anger, irritability
 The Liver controls the blood and the flow of qi to all the organ systems
 Stagnation of Liver blood can lead to dark spots
 Liver blood deficiency can lead to dry skin
 A frequent expression of anger can cause vertical lines between the eyebrows

Spleen

Injured by pensiveness/worry
 Emotional symptoms of imbalance: rumination, overthinking
 The complexion depends on the Spleen's function of transformation of food into qi and blood: nutrient-rich blood is vital to healthy looking skin, and when Spleen qi is deficient, there is a loss of skin tone and sagging
 If the Spleen is unable transport fluids properly, the face will look puffy and there may be bags under the eyes
 Pensiveness can cause lines around the lips and at the bridge of the nose

Kidneys

Injured by fear/fright
 Emotional symptoms of imbalance: fearfulness, isolation, lack of will (zhi)

The Kidneys regulate the fluid balance and store the jing (essence): when Kidney jing is insufficient, moisture is depleted causing dryness and wrinkles and ageing is accelerated

Deficient Kidney yin can cause dark under-eye circles; If Kidney yang is low, there may be puffiness around the eyes

A fearful expression can cause lateral forehead lines (due to raised eyebrows with eyes widened), and lines on cheeks (due to drawing the corners of the mouth laterally).

Blocks to treatment

Possession

Although the word 'possession' is potentially problematic, associated as it is with superstition or religion, a useful way of understanding possession is in terms of a person no longer being in control of him- or herself. It can also be understood as being due to the failure of the person's spirit to shine through. The hallmark sign of possession is a lack of shen in the eyes of the patient; they appear vacant, as if 'no one were home'. The lack of eye contact that typifies possession is evidence that the person's true nature has been obscured and stagnation exists between the sensory orifices and the Heart.¹⁸ According to the *Su Wen* chapter 25, 'Shen is something that you will recognize when you see it. The shen can be observed through the patient's eyes ... you can then visualize the patient's condition in your mind (and) intuitively know what the problem is.'¹⁹

According to J.R. Worsley, possession can take two forms: internal demons (IDs) or external demons (EDs). External demons tend to occur when a patient has experienced extreme weather or climates or an external trauma such as an accident, and would be treated with the 'external dragon' points. In the case of IDs, the patient's problem is typically caused by an emotional issue and is thus seen to be more internal in nature. This clinical pattern involves the presence of phlegm (from the Stomach/Spleen) obscuring the Heart, which generates heat that disturbs the spirit. It is treated with the 'internal dragon' points along the Stomach channel, which resolve phlegm and calm the Heart, thus allowing the spirit to function. In my practice, the incidence of patients seeking cosmetic acupuncture who are possessed is relatively low, however if it is suspected, it should be the first block to be cleared. If a patient is possessed and the block is not cleared, clearing subsequent blocks may be impossible.

Aggressive energy

The first block to consider that holds particular significance to facial acupuncture is aggressive energy (AE, another term for xie qi). Worsley defines AE as: 'Qi which is contaminated and polluted and whose quality is poisonous and destructive.'²⁰ Aggressive energy

compromises functioning throughout the body, mind and spirit, and is understood to spread through the yin organs along the ke cycle of the five elements (see Figure 1). Its treatment dates back to Li Dong-Yuan (1180-1251 C.E), who recommended treating the back-shu points of the zang organs to release evil (xie) qi.²¹ Patients may develop AE after surgery, severe emotional stress or physical illness. AE must be cleared early in the treatment to prevent its spread to other organs as a result of treatment.

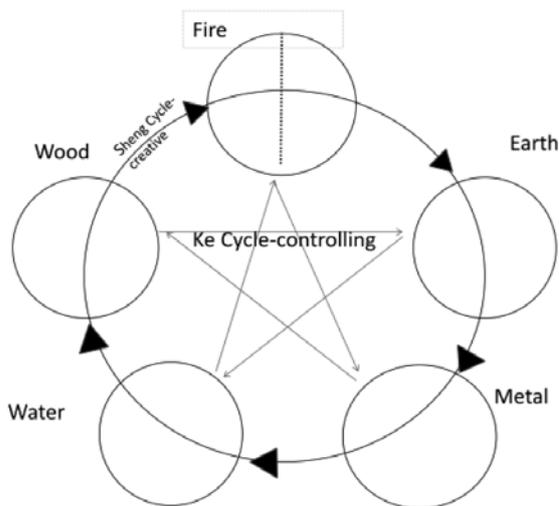


Figure 1: The sheng and ke cycles

The clinical significance of clearing AE before performing facial acupuncture correlates to the nature of facial acupuncture, one of the goals of which is to direct as much clear qi as possible to the face. If AE is present, the large number of needles in the face and the number of channels treated at once can mean that xie qi is inadvertently circulated around the body. This can cause adverse reactions such as headaches, increased blood pressure or unusual sensations and reactions in the skin. Early in my clinical practice, I had not incorporated clearing AE as part of my facial acupuncture protocol. Occasionally patients would report sensations in their face akin to ‘bugs crawling on their skin’, and some would report headaches. I suspected the presence of xie qi may have caused this reaction. After changing my treatment to clear AE, these patients reported the sensation disappeared immediately. Since clearing this block on every new facial acupuncture patient, I have not encountered such adverse reactions to treatment. After having this treatment, patients notably have clearer shen in the eyes, their face is relaxed and they often comment on feeling refreshed and ‘like having my old self back.’

The test for AE is also the treatment; there is no other way to diagnose with certainty that a patient has AE. It is drained from the yin organs by inserting needles very superficially into the back-shu points (see Table 1). Test needles are also placed in each of the three Jiao, either

inside or outside the inner Bladder line. If the needles are inserted to the correct depth they should hang down slightly, but not touch the skin. If the redness around the needles is different to the test needles, then AE is present. Image 1 shows a patient with AE; you can see the redness around the back-shu points but not the test needle. To drain AE the needles must be left in until the redness clears. AE may recur, and can be retested any time you suspect its presence. If other more severe blocks (such as IDs) are present, AE will not clear permanently.

Treatment points	Correspondence
Feishu BL-13	Lung
Jueyinshu BL-14	Pericardium
Xinshu BL-15	Heart
Ganshu BL-18	Liver
Pishu BL-20	Spleen
Shenshu BL-23	Kidney

Table 1: Points for the treatment of aggressive energy

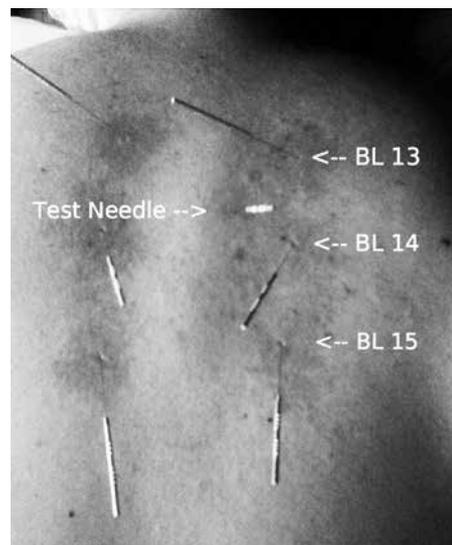


Image 1: Photo of aggressive energy treatment

Husband-wife block

A husband-wife block or imbalance is the most potentially serious of the major blocks. Its presence is a sign that the patient’s natural healing resources have been depleted, and yin and yang are losing functional contact. Left untreated over time, the person’s health will deteriorate to the point of being beyond help. Due to the severe nature of this block, and the number of needles typically used during facial acupuncture treatment, it is imperative to clear this block before doing any type of cosmetic treatment on a patient. Otherwise treatment may further deplete the patient, leaving them weak and at risk of further serious physical and/or emotional deterioration.

The indication of a husband-wife imbalance is the

pulses on the right wrist (the 'wife' side) being much more forceful (strong, tense) than those on the left wrist (the 'husband' side, which are empty, deep and thin). It represents a compromised function of mingmen and a break in the sheng cycle in which the transition from metal to water is not occurring. This imbalance is generated when the patient's virtues of will and aspiration are smothered by resignation to life's circumstances. They may feel trapped in a situation that is out of their control.

The goal of husband-wife treatment is to restore the left / right pulse balance through taking qi from the channels of the wife (right) side and transferring it to those of the left - thus restoring the balance of yin and yang (see Figure 2). This is done through tonifying a series of points that transfer qi from metal to water, earth to water and metal to wood, finishing with tonification of fire (Small Intestine and Heart). The points used are BL-67 & KID-7 (metal to water) KID-3, (earth to water), LIV-4 (metal to wood) and SI-4 and HE-7 (the yuan-source points of fire).

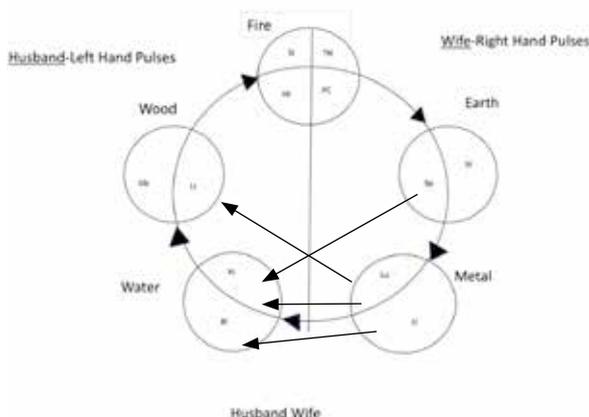


Figure 2: Husband-wife imbalance treatment according to the sheng and ke cycles

Entry-exit blocks

The second type of block with a direct connection to the face is the entry-exit block. This block is based on the theory of the movement of qi through the channels according to the 'Chinese Clock', with each channel having its peak time of function (see Table 2). Any blockage to this circulation will act like a dam, with a reservoir of qi building up behind it. The flow of qi through the channels is as follows:

Lung=>Large Intestine=>Stomach=>Spleen=>Heart=>
 Small Intestine=>Bladder=>Kidney=>Pericardium=>
 San Jiao=>Gall Bladder=>Liver=>back to Lung

Entry-exit blocks can be the result of injury to an area, a scar, or qi stagnation (pathogenic obstruction) due to emotional or environmental causes. Given the location of the entry and exit points of the fu organs on the face, it is easy to understand the significance of clearing entry-exit blocks as part of facial acupuncture treatment. Entry and exit points on the face are located near the sensory orifices and have significant effects emotionally and psychologically.

They can also figure prominently in the treatment of Bell's palsy, stroke, TMJ, tinnitus, and any disease or dysfunction impacting the eyes, ears or nose. They are major portals of qi in the head, thus communication through these points is essential for both health and the radiance of shen through the face (see Image 2).

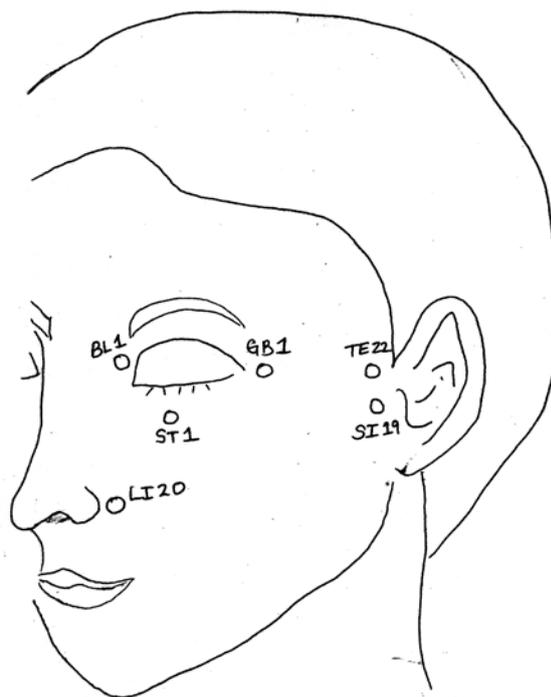


Image 2: Entry-exit points of the yang channels on the face

The method by which entry-exit blocks are diagnosed is through the pulse. If the pulse of the 'exit' channel is stronger than the 'entry' channel - as per the sequence on the Chinese clock - this indicates a block to the flow of qi. For example, if the Small Intestine pulse is greater in strength than the Bladder pulse then this could indicate a block. The six main entry-exit blocks are as follows:

- Spleen-Heart
- Small Intestine-Bladder
- Kidney-Pericardium
- San Jiao-Gall Bladder
- Liver-Lung

The treatment for entry-exit blocks is to tonify the exit point of the channel (with the stronger pulse), and then tonify the entry point of the next channel (weaker pulse). If the pulse of the 'exit' channel is very strong, it may be necessary to use reducing technique it for five to ten minutes before tonifying the entry channel. This will allow the qi to move freely from one channel to the next. Table 2 gives details of the times of the Chinese clock, channels and entry-exit points:

Time	Channel	Entry Point	Exit Point
11AM-1PM	Heart	Jiquan HE-1	HE-9 Shaochong
1PM- 3PM	Small Intestine	Shaoze SI-1	SI-19 Tinggong
3 PM- 5PM	Bladder	Jingming BL-1	BL-67 Zhiyin
5PM- 7PM	Kidney	Yongquan KID-1	KID-22 Bulang
7PM- 9PM	Pericardium	Tianchi P-1	P-8 Laogong
9PM- 11PM	San Jiao	Guanchong SJ-1	SJ-22 Heliao
11PM- 1AM	Gallbladder	Tongziliao GB-1	GB-41 Zulinqi
1AM- 3AM	Liver	Dadun LIV-1	LIV-14 Qimen
3AM- 5AM	Lung	Zhongfu LU-1	LU-7 Lieque
5AM- 7AM	Large Intestine	Hegu L.I.-4	L.I.-20 Yingxiang
7AM - 9AM	Stomach	Chengqi ST-1	ST-42 Chongyang
9AM- 11AM	Spleen	Yinbai SP-1	SP-21 Dabao

Table 2: Entry-exit points

A relatively rare type of entry-exit block is between the Ren Mai (Conception Vessel) and the Du Mai (Governing Vessel). The Ren Mai and Du Mai are like reservoirs that feed the rivers of the other channels. If there is a Ren-Du block, the rivers are not being supplied by these reservoirs and the pulses can become very low. This type of block can arise from physical or sexual abuse, physical trauma, or an unresolved husband-wife imbalance. The patient may appear to have energy (some are pushing themselves very hard and are unaware of their exhaustion), but their pulses will be deficient. The effect of this depletion can be severe because all the other channels and organs will be affected. This relates to cosmetic acupuncture specifically in that the Ren Mai has the function of collecting yin qi and regulating all the yin channels that are so vital to healthy ageing and preventing a withered, lackluster complexion. Equally, the Du Mai's function of collecting all the yang qi

in the body is vital to raising qi to the head and face. If the Ren and Du are blocked, qi and yin will not rise to the face or circulate. Additionally, the location of Chengjiang REN-24 and Yinjiao DU-28 are significant in that both vessels terminate in the face. If an individual has a Ren-Du block and it is not cleared, it will greatly reduce the effectiveness of facial acupuncture treatments. More treatments will be required and the treatments will not hold as long. The treatment protocol for this block is as follows:

Tonify Huiyin REN-1
 Tonify Chengjiang REN-24
 Tonify Changqiang DU-1
 Tonify Yinjiao DU-28

Conclusion

At the core of facial acupuncture is the principle of treating the whole person and allowing the full health of the body to reflect in the face and on the skin, whilst allowing for full expression of balanced emotional health. Regardless of the nature and severity of a block, its presence will impede the effectiveness of facial acupuncture treatments. Without this clinical approach, treatments are likely to progress slowly and not have long-lasting effects. Blocks can arise at any point in treatment, so it is crucial to look for them each time before treating. Learning the theory and treatment of blocks and how they can impede facial rejuvenation and recovery from neuromuscular facial conditions should be an integral part of any facial acupuncture treatment.

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