Traditional treatment for a modern problem

A new study aims to find out if acupuncture can help men with fertility problems

BY VISHWESH IYER

WHEN IT'S A PROBLEM WITH SPERM – either what's produced is insufficient or they are not active enough – acupuncture may be an alternative for couples trying for a family.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, commonly referred to as TCM, subfertility is caused by a deficiency of what it refers to as the kidney function. Using herbal remedies and/or acupuncture to strengthen this vital function can help improve the production and quality of sperm.

Although there have been studies, "we don't really know how effective acupuncture is in treating male subfertility", said Dr Yong Tze Tein, Senior Consultant, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Singapore General Hospital (SGH).

This is because despite its growing popularity, TCM isn't as well researched as western medicine, said Ms Cui Shu Li, Senior Principal Acupuncturist, SGH. For instance, studies elsewhere in the use of acupuncture to treat male subfertility show positive results, but they can't clearly isolate acupuncture as the sole cause of the improvement.

To explore acupuncture as an alternative for men with certain fertility problems, SGH has teamed up with Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution to study whether using acupuncture is as effective as earlier studies suggest. The institution already treats men with fertility issues using a combination of acupuncture and herbal concoctions with some success, said Mr Chong Shaw Fong, Chief TCM Physician, Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution.

In the joint trial, eligible participants will undergo 20 hour-long sessions of acupuncture treatment, held twice a week for three months. The participants won't be given other forms of fertility treatment during this period.

During treatment, a TCM physician or acupuncturist certified by the Ministry of Health will administer acupuncture to several acupoints at the front and back of the body, with the points electrically stimulated to strengthen the kidney function. In TCM, the kidney is considered vital for procreation, with the kidney function seen to be governing the body's reproductive organs.

The trial, funded by a government grant, will continue till 2012. The researchers hope to study at least 60 eligible participants. Semen samples will be taken before, during and after the acupuncture treatment to assess the participants' response to the therapy. Participants can receive treatment at SGH, during working hours, or in the evenings at Singapore Thong Chai Medical Institution.

Men between 21 and 55 years of age who meet a certain sperm count and activity criteria, who have been unsuccessful in conceiving for at least a year, and have not undergone surgical procedures related to male fertility for at least a year before, can apply to participate in this trial.

To participate in the SGH-Thong Chai Medical Institute TCM trial or for more information, call 6326-5925.

Ms Cui Shu Li (right) and her team embarked on a study to explore the efficacy of acupuncture in treating male infertility.

PHOTOS: ALECIA NEO

ILLUSTRATIONS: HEYMANS THO

Couple therapy

When a couple remains childless after years of trying, the woman is often thought to be the cause. However, blame should be apportioned equally, as about a third of cases is due to the man, with an equal portion attributed to female problems or to problems in both partners. Another 10 to 15 per cent of cases have no known cause.

The modern lifestyle, food, environment and late marriage may contribute to difficulty in conceiving in both men

For that reason, it is not just the wife who will be tested when couples seek treatment at SGH's Centre for Assisted Reproduction (CARE), said Ms Amy Lee Shaw Ni, CARE's Chief Embryologist. "It is extremely important in the evaluation of subfertility to consider the couple as a unit in evaluation and treatment." However, in most cases, the men aren't keen to step forward and most of the initial tests are done on the wives, she said. The good news is that this trend is slowly changing.

Should the husband be found to

fertilisation (IVF). But for a large majority of men, the cause is not known and that limits management. It could be genetic, but certain lifestyle factors like smoking can play a role.

IVF is an option in the treatment of subfertility for both men and women – but the procedure where the woman's egg cells are fertilised by sperm outside the body and then implanted in the womb, costs about $10,000 and success is not assured.

The possibility of conception varies greatly, depending on the age