

Utility of cupping therapy *Hijamat* in Unani medicine

Jamal Akhtar* & M Khalid Siddiqui

Central Council for Research in Unani Medicine, 61-65, Institutional Area, Opp D-Block,
Janakpuri, New Delhi 110 058

E-mail: jamal7862@yahoo.co.in; jamal7862@rediffmail.com

Received 12 April 2006; revised 30 October 2006

Unani physicians have described different methods to treat diseases including pharmacotherapy, dietotherapy and regimental therapy. Cupping is one of the oldest and frequently practiced regimental therapies, which is indicated in various diseases, e.g. arthritis, migraine, asthma, headache, hemorrhoids, etc. alone or in combination with other therapies. The paper discusses the method and indications of the cupping therapy mentioned in Unani System of Medicine.

Keywords: Cupping, Unani medicine, *Hijamat*, Regimental therapy

IPC Int. Cl.⁸: A61K36/00, A61P9/14, A61P11/00, A61P19/00, A61P21/00, A61P25/00, A61P29/00

Unani System of Medicine founded by Hippocrates in 460-377 BC is based on the concept of balancing body humours. Their misbalance causes diseases, whereas restoration of the balance leads to health. Unani medicine involves 4 elements-earth, air, water and fire; 4 natures-cold, hot, wet and dry, and 4 humours- blood or sanguineous humour (which is hot & wet), phlegm (cold & wet), yellow bile or cholera (hot & dry), and black bile or melancholia (cold & dry)¹. This system of medicine strives to find the best possible ways by which a person can lead a healthy life with least sickness. It describes 6 essential factors for maintaining health and preventing diseases called *Asbab-e-Sittah-e-Zaruriah*, which includes-air, food & drinks, bodily movement & repose, psychic movement & repose, sleep & wakefulness, and evacuation & retention. All diseases can be treated on by pharmacotherapy (*Ilaj-bid-dawa*), in which drugs of animal, mineral or plant origin are used in crude form, either as a single drug or in compound form; regimental therapy (*Ilaj-bil-tadbir*) in which Unani physicians have described various methods like cupping (*Hijamat*), massage (*Dalak*), exercise (*Riyazat*), Turkish bath (*Hammam*), venesection (*Fasd*), leeching (*Taleeqe*), and cauterization (*Aml-e-Kai*). It also includes dietotherapy (*Ilaj-bil-ghiza*) in which alteration in the quantity and quality of the diet is done, depending on the nature of the disease and surgery (*Ilaj-bil-yad*) if unavoidable. Unani physicians have also laid emphasis on physic

(*Tabi'at*) by which body works physiologically and resists against infections (*Taddiyah*). It is also called *Madicatrix naturae*. If it is strong, the body functions smoothly; if it is weak, the risk of illness increases.

Cupping or *Hijamat* is a method used for local evacuation or diversion of morbid humors in which a horn (*singhi*) is attached to the surface of the skin of the diseased part through negative pressure created by vacuum². The vacuum is created by the introduction of heat or suction. In the late period, a glass cup replaces the horn and hence the procedure came to be known as cupping. Older methods employ the use of alcohol soaked cotton at the base of brass, steel or glass cups, which is subsequently lit on fire³. The heating and then cooling of the gases inside the closed system causes a vacuum and suctioning effect. The edge of the cup is placed on the patient's skin as the fire dies out and the vacuum pulls the skin into the cup. The suction of skin into the cup causes trauma to superficial vessels, causing ecchymosed and purpura in a circular arrangement. Cupping is a widely discussed therapeutic regimen in the Unani classical literature. Physicians have been indicating its use for various diseases. According to the Unani System of Medicine, diseases are due to the disproportionate distribution of humours or *Akhlat* (blood or *dam*, phlegm or *balgham*, bile or *saфра*, black bile or *sauda*) inside the body⁴. These humours, which are out of proportion, collect in various parts of the body at times producing inflammation, and leading to presentation of various diseases, e.g. in case of arthritis, the humours collect in the joints, thereby

*Corresponding author

leading to pain, swelling, joint immobilization and other articular tissue damage⁵⁻⁶.

Types

Cupping is of two types, cupping with blood letting (*Hijamat bilshurt*) and cupping without blood letting (*Hijamat bilashurt*). The last one can be done in two ways, vacuum is created by using fire (*Bil-naar*) and vacuum is created not by fire (*Bilanaar*), but instead suction pumps or manual suction is used to create a vacuum that helps in the adhesion of the cup^{4, 6-15}. Cupping with blood letting or wet cupping involves the incising of skin either before the cup is placed or during the process of suctioning with needles placed at the base of the cup being used¹⁶. Also, lubricants have been used to move the cup around once it is placed on the skin to cover a wider area¹⁷. Sets of 4, 6 or 10 cups are applied for 5, 10 or more minutes and repeated on every 4-6 months depending on the nature of the disease¹⁸. The areas being treated are usually rotated, but the most common sites on which the cups have been applied are the back, chest, abdomen, and buttock, however, other areas, including the face, are known to be treated¹⁹. The second and third hours of the day are the best time for cupping. Cupping should not be done just after the bath but have to wait for one hour except in case of blood thickening.

Mechanism

Various theories are given about the benefits of the cupping therapy. One theory suggests that it is by increasing circulation around the area of cupping and allowing for the elimination of toxins trapped in the tissues¹⁸. Another theory suggests that it is the process of transferring discomfort and even pathology from one site to another that may cure the original site of any disease process²⁰. The psychosomatic theory also exists that explains the effect of cupping as purely a placebo effect¹⁸. Cupping with blood letting works

according to the principle of *Tanqiya-e-Mavad*,^{8,10} i.e. evacuation of morbid matters from the affected area. It also improves circulation to the area and provides better nutrition to the area, where it is applied. Cupping without blood letting works on the principle of *Imala-e-mavad*,^{8,10} i.e. diversion of morbid humors from one site to the other.

Indications

Cupping has been used for a number of ailments. Different type of cupping is indicated in different diseases. *Hijamat bilshurt* is used in various diseases like heaviness of head, asthma, dyspnoea, migraine, quinsy, palpitation, headache, hemorrhoids, amenorrhoea, renal and ureteric colic, plethora, pustules and boils, sciatica, gout, pain of the knee, diseases of the liver, spleen and psoriasis, etc.^{7,10,14,21,22}. *Hijamat bilashurt* is used in various diseases like excessive menstrual bleeding, removal of deep swelling, scrotal hernia, sciatica, piles, hydrocele, gout, renal calculi and epistaxis, etc¹⁰. Cupping is mainly described as treatment for chronic pain including lower back pain and headache. Recent reports described its use for other nonspecific disease processes including migraine, Cough, arthritis, acute trigeminal neuralgia, indigestion and menstrual disturbance, acne, pneumonia and acute myelitis, Chronic urticaria, fibromyalgia syndrome, acute facial paralysis and ankylosing spondylitis^{1, 23-35}.

Applications

Cupping is applied on different parts of the body for different diseases (Table 1).

Side effects

Cupping causes blood to be drawn to the surface of the skin, which can cause red marks, swelling, and bruising. No serious side effect has reported from the cupping except one case of panniculitis³⁶. Wet cupping may increase the risk of infection, as the skin barrier is

Table 1—Applications and uses of cupping

Applications	Uses
Nape of the neck	Fetor of the mouth ¹ , headache, meningitis, diphtheria, stomatitis, conjunctivitis ¹⁹ .
Calf muscles	Renal colic, metritis, amenorrhoea ^{1,19} .
Over the loins	Inflammatory masses in upper part of thigh, scabies, pustules, elephantiasis, hemorrhoids ^{1,19} .
Extremities	Headache, meningitis, hyper pyrexia ¹⁹
Between the shoulder blades	Hemoptysis ¹⁸ , pain in upper arms and throat ^{1, 19} .
Umbilicus	Abdominal colic, gastralgia and metritis ¹⁹ .
Below mammary gland	Menorrhagia, and puerperal diseases ¹⁹ .
Under the chin	Cleanses head and jaws ¹ .
In front of thigh	Orchitis, leg ulcers ¹ .

compromised. Physicians have suspected physical abuse when the lesions are seen in children leading to misdiagnosis³⁷. So, it is concluded that cupping therapy (*Hijamat*) has unique features that are easily recognized. Efficacy and safety of the therapy in different diseases as indicated by the Unani physicians can be evaluated on modern parameters, and can be used single or as an adjuvant with other therapies, so that the therapy becomes more commonly used for the treatment of various diseases.

References

- 1 Gruner OC, *The Canon of Medicine of Avicenna*, (Luzac and Co, London), 1930, 77, 508-512.
- 2 Mohd Akbar Arzani, *Meezan-ut-tib* (Urdu) translated by Kabeeruddin M, (Daftarul Masih, Marol, Delhi), 1940, 147-148.
- 3 Look KM & Look RM, Skin scraping, cupping, and moxibustion that may mimic physical abuse, *J Forensic Sci*, 42(1997) 103-105.
- 4 Ibn-e-Sina, *Al-Qanoon Fit-Tib* (Urdu) translated by Kantoori GH, (Munshi Naval Kishore, Lucknow), 1927, 274-276.
- 5 Wyngarden JB, Smith LH & Bennet JC, *Cecil Text Book of Medicine*, (WB Saunders Publication), 2002, 1550-1557.
- 6 Wasti N, *Tibb-ul-Arab* (Urdu) translation by Sir Edward Brown Book, Arabian Medicine, (Saqaf-e-Islamia, Lahore), 1990, 444-446.
- 7 Ismail Jurjani, *Zakheera-e-Kharzam-e-Shahi*, Vol.I, (Urdu) translated by Khan HH, (Munshi Naval Kishore, Lucknow), 1903, 224-225.
- 8 Ibn-ul-Kuf, *Kitab-ul-Umda Fil Jarahat*, (Daeratul Moarif Usmania University, Hyderabad), 1935, 15-23.
- 9 Ahmad J & Qadeer A, *Unani-The Science of Graeco-Arab Medicine*, (Lustre Press Pvt Ltd, New Delhi), 1998, 53.
- 10 Spink MS, Lewis GL & Barkley CA, *Abulcassis on Surgery and Instruments* (California Press, London), 1973, 656-673.
- 11 Amanullah, *Um-ul-Ilaj*, (Munshi Naval Kishore, Kanpur), 1880, 5.
- 12 Arzani A, *Tibb-e-Akbar*, Vol II, (Munshi Naval Kishore, Lucknow), 1956, 575-578.
- 13 Bennion E, *Antique Medical Instruments*, (Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd, London), 1980, 44-46.
- 14 Ibn-e-Sina, *Al-Qanoon-Fit-Tib* (English), (Faculty of Islamic Studies, Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi), 1995, 364-367.
- 15 Ibrahim A Sheikh, *Tasheel-ul-Munafe-Fit-Tib-Wa-Hikaya*, (Matba Mustafa-al-Baabil-Hubli), 1967, 27-31.
- 16 King DF & Davis MW, Cupping. An erstwhile common modality of therapy, *J Am Acad Dermatol*, 8 (1983) 563.
- 17 Turk JL & Allen E, Bleeding and cupping, *Ann R Coll Surg Engl*, 65(1983) 128-131.
- 18 Kouskoukis CE & Leider M, Cupping-The art and the value, *Am J Dermatopathol*, 5 (1983) 235-239.
- 19 Hamdani H, *Usool-e-Tibb*, (Urdu Academy, Uttar Pradesh), 1980, 490-492.
- 20 Epstein J, The therapeutic value of cupping, *New York Med J*, 112 (1920) 584-585.
- 21 Azmi WA, *Molijat*, (Anjuman-e-Taraqqi Urdu Beuro, New Delhi), 1992, 201-202.
- 22 Tabri Ali Bin Rabban, *Firdaus-ul-Hikmat*, Vol I, (Urdu) translated by Ashraf R, (Hamdard Foundation Press, Karachi, Pakistan), 1994, 860.
- 23 Yoo SS & Tausk F, Cupping-East meets West, *Int J Dermatol*, 43 (2004) 664.
- 24 Duo X, 100 cases of intractable migraine treated by acupuncture and cupping, *J Trad Chin Med*, 19 (1999) 205-206.
- 25 Liu X, Treatment of cough in children by cupping on back, *J Trad Chin Med*, 16(1996) 125.
- 26 Wang K, 116 cases of Gonococcal arthritis treated with acupuncture, *J Trad Chin Med*, 16 (1996) 108-111.
- 27 Anjum N, Jamil S, Hannan A, Akhtar J & Ahmad B, Clinical efficacy of *Hijamat* (cupping) in *Waja-ul-Mafasil* (Arthritis), *Indian J Traditional Knowledge*, 4 (2005) 412-415.
- 28 Zhang Z, Observation on therapeutic effects of blood letting punctures with cupping in acute trigeminal neuralgia, *J Trad Chin Med*, 17 (1997), 272-274.
- 29 Yang R, Treatment of obstinate diseases by acupuncture and cupping, *J Trad Chin Med.*, 21 (2001) 118-121.
- 30 Chen D, Jiang N & Cong X, 47 cases of acne treated by prick-blood letting plus cupping, *J Trad Chin Med*, 13 (1993) 185-186.
- 31 Ding LN, 50 cases of acne treated by puncturing acupoint dazhui in combination with cupping, *J Trad Chin Med*, 5 (1985) 128.
- 32 Osler W, *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, (New York: Appleton), 1931, 112.
- 33 Liu D, Pricking, cupping and qu feng tiao ying decoction for treatment of chronic urticaria, *J Trad Chin Med*, 22(2002) 269-71.
- 34 Li CD, Fu XY, Jiang ZY, Yang X, Huang SQ, Wang QF, Liu J & Chen Y, Clinical Study on combination of acupuncture, cupping and medicine for treatment of fibromyalgia syndrome, *Zhongguo Zhen Jiu*, 26 (2006) 8-10.
- 35 Li WH, Clinical observation on plum-blossom needle therapy combined with cupping for treatment of acute facial paralysis, *Zhongguo Zhen Jiu*, 25 (2005) 765-7.
- 36 Lee JS, Ahn SK & Lee SH, Factitial panniculitis induced by cupping and acupuncture, *Cutis*, 55 (1995) 217-218.
- 37 Asnes RS & Wisotsky DH, Cupping lesions simulating child abuse, *J Pediatr* 99 (1981) 267-268.