

The story of herbal medicine

People often say that "herbal medicines are safe because they are natural," but that is clearly a mistake. All or part of plants or animals, or substances produced or excreted from plants or animals that have been processed by drying, cutting, crushing, extraction, fermentation, etc., and some mineral bodies are called "herbal medicines." The majority of herbal medicines have mild physiological effects, but some are safe because they have almost no physiological effect (e.g., rhino horns and cicada shells). On the other hand, there are also many lethal poisons (e.g., digitalis, monkshood, hawkweed, toad venom, cinnabar, arsenic acid), so the commonly held rumor and assumption that "herbal medicines are safe" is incorrect. In ancient China, a phenomenon was discovered in which a prescription (prescription drug) made by mixing several types of herbal medicines with only one ingredient exhibited a stronger physiological effect (medicinal effect) A and a weaker physiological effect (medicinal effect) B than when the herbal medicine was used alone. After that, many prescriptions (herbal medicines) were created by trying out various combinations of herbal medicines and their applications. During this time, there must have been countless attempts to apply herbal medicines and prescriptions to patients, and there were both failures and successes.

In the narrow sense, herbal medicine refers to a medical system that uses herbal medicines, and is a development in Japan of Chinese medicine (called traditional Chinese medicine), which has been introduced to Japan since ancient times. Traditional Chinese medicine was introduced to Japan by students, monks, and immigrants sent to China after the Nara and Heian periods, or via the Korean Peninsula. During the Edo period, new knowledge and techniques were introduced along with herbal medicines through trade with Nagasaki, and herbal medicine was further developed in Japan by being further examined, selected, and refined. Traditional Chinese medicine and Kampo medicine are very complicated and difficult to understand, so to explain briefly and without detail, Kampo medicine has diagnostic points called "Sho" (Yin and Yang, exterior and interior, cold and heat, deficiency and excess, qi, blood and water) based on

a unique philosophy that was introduced from traditional Chinese medicine. In Kampo medicine, there are treatment methods and Kampo prescriptions (herbal medicines) that correspond to combinations of these Sho, and the amount of herbal medicines in the prescriptions is adjusted or new herbal medicines are added depending on the patient's symptoms. In today's Western medicine, Sho would be equivalent to data such as body temperature, blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory tests, electrocardiograms, blood tests, CT/MRI/X-ray/ultrasound images, gastrointestinal endoscopy, and interviews. While Western medical data is highly objective and scientific, Sho diagnosis and Kampo prescriptions based on it are judged by Kampo doctors based on subjective and empirical intuition and family tradition, and are generally said to be lacking in science. This is a big difference from Western medicine, which is based on science and objectivity.

Perhaps because Kampo medicine lacks scientific value, there is no official licensing system for Kampo doctors in Japan, and even if there are "Kampo specialists," the level varies widely, and it is still a minor presence. On the other hand, in Japan, the efficacy and techniques of "acupuncture and moxibustion," "massage," and "osteopathic (bone setting)" are recognized within Oriental medicine, and there are university departments and vocational schools, and there are national licenses for "acupuncturists" and "judo therapists" as official licenses. Many of the basic treatments and procedures performed by acupuncturists and judo therapists are covered by health insurance, and are easily and widely used by ordinary people in medical care, but the general public's values of both qualifications seem to be much lower than those of doctors. In light of this situation, Kampo medicine is the only Oriental medicine in Japan that has been marginalized and does not have an official licensing system, but this is probably due to the fact that the exclusivity of the Japan Medical Association, which has political power, remains deeply rooted in the current medical system centered on Western medicine. And doctors today are so busy learning new skills and knowledge, new equipment and treatments that they don't have time to turn to traditional Chinese medicine, but I imagine that they don't have the generosity or courage to get an official qualification as a traditional Chinese medicine doctor and then give it up.

However, instead, the efficacy, safety, and active ingredients of nearly 150 types of traditional Chinese medicine have been scientifically elucidated in Japan. Traditionally, traditional Chinese medicines generally required processes such as boiling, kneading, and pilling just before use, but these 150 types of traditional Chinese medicines are now made into dosage forms such as extract granules, processed to be easy to take, and sealed in packages, and are used in clinical practice as health insurance-covered drugs, or sold commercially as general medicines, although they are somewhat expensive. About 90% of clinicians recognize their usefulness and use them as a complement to modern medicine in the same way as Western medicine. If I may be biased, I would say that Japan has successfully incorporated traditional Eastern medicine into modern medicine, creating a unique medical environment that does not exist in the West. As mentioned in the 99th issue of the Remaining Notes, the author was prescribed and took the herbal medicine Daikenchuto immediately after his surgery for colon cancer, and recognized its excellent intestinal regulating effect, experiencing its wonderfulness and usefulness firsthand. Among these 150 types of herbal medicine, there are few that have an immediate effect, and most of them improve the constitution over time, but of course they have side effects, so ordinary people should be careful when purchasing and taking them of their own volition as drugs, etc.

Recently, there are many expensive supplements and beauty products that are shady and dubious, and are circulating on the streets, misleading people. The symptoms and effects that are targeted are often constipation, whitening and removing blemishes, obesity, diabetes, cholesterol, back and knee pain, tonic, beauty, hair dye, antioxidants, and sleep. TV, magazines, newspapers, etc. are full of commercials for these products using famous celebrities, and many people are easily fooled and end up buying them. Of course, it is important to pay attention to whether they are effective, but it is also important to be very careful about harmful side effects and toxicity. These are not strictly regulated like drugs, but are treated as food or cosmetics, so the government will not take action unless a serious problem occurs. Furthermore, the prices are set at a trial price regardless of the low manufacturing costs, usually in the range of several thousand yen, and

there are many mechanisms in the commercials to encourage purchases, so caution is also required in this respect. It is important to protect yourself (physically and wallet-wise) by checking with your own eyes and senses the intended symptoms, intended effects, side effects, and presence or absence of toxicity after starting or stopping use for a while (for example, several weeks to a month).