

Special Techniques

Characteristics and key to manipulation of fire needle

火针焮刺的操作关键与施术特色

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ABSTRACT

To explore the characteristics and key to manipulation and of traditional fire needle in China. Fire needle refers to a therapy with red-hot needle inserting into the skin. Special requirements are proposed in terms of selected acupoints, to burn needle body, fire needle manipulation, needle withdrawal disposal and other aspects. The therapy is characterized by “paying equal attention to needling and scorching, and laying emphasis on warming and unblocking”, “rapid needle insertion and withdrawal with coherent manipulations”, and “performing needling based on pattern differentiation”. In the process of applying red-hot needling with fire needles, normalized and unified manipulations, accurate point selection and safe stimulus should be emphasized, and the performer should be dedicated and scrupulous, and keep the manipulations coherent in order to achieve the “stable, accurate and rapid” effect. The popularization and application of red-hot needling with fire needles in TCM clinical practice can further enrich the acupuncture therapy, so that this ancient and traditional needling method can give play to its role renewedly.

KEY WORDS: fire needle; red-hot needling; manipulation

Red-hot needling with fire needles refers to a therapy with red-hot needle inserting into the skin. With the characteristics of specific and significant efficacy as well as convenient manipulation and rapid effect onset, this method has relieved patients' pain for thousands of years. However, the development of fire needle therapy had lagged far behind other needling methods in acupuncture-moxibustion medicine due to the social and historical reasons and its own characteristics, and the slow improvement of needling instruments and difficult application had made the therapy come to the verge of disappearance. In recent years, new-type fire needles have been developed constantly, and the scope of application gradually expanded, but there are few people who really grasp the needling techniques, and the therapy has still been ignored up to now. At present, national standard for fire needling manipulation has been formulated in China, but there are still some problems to be solved, such as selection of appropriate needle, the depth of red-hot needling and needle retention period for

different diseases, as well as the contraindications and mechanism of action of fire needling, etc^[1]. To solve these problems will be helpful to promote the clinical study of fire needle, and allow better application and development of red-hot needling with fire needles.

SELECTION OF NEEDLE

The materials for fire needles should be hard and heat-resistant

“Sharpen your tools before achieving your goal”. A set of handy needle will be needed for performance of red-hot needling with fire needles. Fire needles should be made of special materials. Since the red-hot needles will be inserted into skin in an instant after being heated at a high temperature, the materials for fire needles should be heat-resistant, hard and forceful. The needles should remain hard and straight even though they are burned red, and they possess the characteristics of “harder after burning”. The fire needles made of common stainless steel possess not

strong capacity of heat transmission, they will anneal, discolor and soften after burning, and the needle body is easy to bend and abrade which will impact the normal use. Now the fire needles are most made of manganese-tungsten alloy, chromium-iron alloy, molybdenum metal and other materials which possess high heat conductivity coefficient and strong capacity of heat transmission, and can undergo the temperature of higher than 800 °C. With the characteristics of without bending after burning at high temperature, strong rigidity, no rust, no plucking, no annealing, no deformation, not easy to break, and can successfully penetrate the skin, muscle, scar and connective tissues, these kinds of fire needles are convenient for use. It should be noted that the needles with strong capacity of heat transmission possess the characteristic of fast heat dissipation, therefore, once the action is slightly slow, the heat may be lost, which will not only increase patients' pain and affect the clinical effect, but also harm the human body^[2].

Appropriate structure and reasonable requirement

A fire needle is mainly composed of a needle tip, a needle body and a needle handle. Generally, the needle tip is sharp and slightly obtuse, the needle body is slightly thick, hard and straight, and the needle handle should possess good heat insulation property^[3]. The needle tip should not be too sharp, and the sharp and slightly obtuse tip is preferred. After burning, the red-hot fire needle can be inserted into the skin easier than filiform needle, so the tip of fire needle should not be too sharp, otherwise, repeated burning will make the tip brittle and easy to break. The body of fire needle should be hard and straight. After burning, the needle body cannot be held by hand, but the fire needles are usually applied at the tough lesions such as hyperplastic tissue and scar tissue, which requires that the needle body should be hard, especially after burning. The smooth and straight surface of the needle body without bending can ensure the successful needle insertion and withdrawal, avoiding expanding the pinhole. The needle handle can be wrapped with copper material, which is not only convenient for users to hold the needle, but also heat-insulated. Only in this way, the red-hot fire needles can be inserted at the acupoint in a stable, accurate and rapid manner.

Suitable size and definite purpose

For red-hot needling with fire needles, it was emphasized to “select thick needles for strong constitution, select thin needles for delicate skin and select moderate needles for soft part of body”. All fire needles are roughly classified into three types:

thick fire needle, median-thick fire needle and thin fire needle. With a diameter of 1.1 mm, thick fire needle is mainly used for acupuncture at the sites with solid lesions, such as sinus tract, anal fistula, scrofula, cysts, nodules, varicose veins of lower limb, thecal cyst and various ulcer and ecthyma. With a diameter of 0.8 mm, median-thick fire needle is used mostly, in addition to face and the sites with less muscle, median-thick fire needles are available in all parts of the body, including all acupoints and tender points in limbs and body. With a diameter of 0.5 mm, thin fine needle is mainly used for facial acupoints. There are many vessels and nerves on the face with sensitive sense of pain, and the use of thin fine needles can reduce the pain, and avoid forming scars due to unexpectedly improper manipulation. Thin fire needles are also generally used in the extremities and the parts with less muscle, or for the seniors, children and the people with weak constitution^[4].

Filiform-fire needle is usually applied clinically in recent years, which is also called “extremely thin fire needle”. It is generally believed that the fire needle is filled with heat, while the filiform needle can reduce the pain since it is thin, and their advantages are selected jointly for filiform-fire needle. The fire needle may aggravate the pain since it is thick, and the filiform needle has not enough *qi* due to its small size, their disadvantages are avoided in order to stimulate *yang qi* by virtue of the fire power, and strengthen the heat in the body^[5]. With a diameter of 0.28–0.38 mm, filiform-fire needle possess thinner needle body, thus obtaining smaller pinhole, so the operator can hold the needle steady, insert into the skin accurately, and grasp the depth easily. The filiform-fire needle is easy to burn, and it will be red-hot after burning only for a few seconds, which compensates for the deficiency of traditional fire needles. With less pain, high efficiency and slight damage to the skin, filiform-fire needles can be used in everywhere of the whole body^[6].

MASTERY OF OPERATIVE TECHNIQUES

Determine the site and perform needling accurately

The key to red-hot needling with fire needle is to select points accurately, which determines whether the red-hot needling is effective. The effect will be good if the point selection is accurate, and the effect will be poor if the point selection is not accurate. Acupoint selection based on pattern differentiation and disease differentiation, and *Ashi* point combined with local point selection can be used for fire needle. The acupoints selected are basically the same as

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