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# Medical Case of Erysipelas Treated Externally with Wuwei Xiaodu Decoction Combined with Olibanum and Myrrha

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**Abstract:** Erysipelas is an infectious skin disease caused by hemolytic streptococcal infection. It is an acute cutaneous reticular lymphangitis characterized by the sudden onset of bright red skin, resembling vermilion paint, with clear boundaries, and burning pain. Professor Zhou Shaohua applied Wuwei Xiaodu Decoction combined with external application of olibanum and myrrha to treat erysipelas, achieving satisfactory clinical results. This study introduces Professor Zhou Shaohua's experience in treating erysipelas and provides supporting evidence through clinical case studies.

**Keywords:** Zhou Shaohua; Erysipelas; Traditional Chinese medicine treatment

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## 1. Introduction

Erysipelas, commonly known as “flowing fire”, is also referred to as “dan piao” or “fire dan” in ancient Chinese medical literature. It is an acute cutaneous reticular lymphangitis characterized by the sudden onset of bright red skin, resembling vermilion paint, with clear boundaries, and burning pain<sup>[1]</sup>. “Su Wen·Zhi Zhen Yao Da Lun” states: “When the Shaoyang governs the sky, when the exogenous pathogenic factors prevail, erysipelas manifests externally, along with conditions like erysipelatos sores and ulcers...” “Zhu Bing Yuan Hou Lun·Various Conditions of Erysipelas” says: “Erysipelas is characterized by sudden redness on the body, resembling the appearance of cinnabar application, hence it is called ‘dan’ (erysipelas). It may occur on the feet or abdomen, covering an area as large as the palm, and is caused by wind-heat and malignant toxins. In severe cases, it resembles carbuncles; if not treated promptly, the pain becomes unbearable, leading to prolonged ulceration and decay.” This condition frequently affects the face, chest, abdomen, and lower limbs, and is classified as “baotou huodan” (erysipelas of the head), “neifa dandu” (internal erysipelas), and “liuhuo” (erysipelas of the lower limbs)<sup>[2]</sup> based on the site of onset. Clinically, erysipelas of the lower limbs is the most common.

Western medicine considers erysipelas an acute non-suppurative inflammation caused by infection of the skin

and its reticular lymphatic vessels by group B hemolytic streptococcus. It has an acute onset, initially presenting with fever and chills, followed by the rapid appearance of well-defined localized redness, swelling, heat, and pain. Pressing on the affected skin causes blanching, and the skin appears tense with a burning pain. It commonly occurs on the face and lower limbs<sup>[3]</sup>. Generally, the prognosis is favorable, with resolution occurring after 5 to 6 days. The skin color changes from bright red to dark red or brownish-yellow, eventually peeling off to heal. In severe cases, the red and swollen areas may be accompanied by petechiae, purpura, or vesicles of varying sizes, occasionally leading to suppuration or skin necrosis. There may also be cases where the condition resolves on one side while progressing on the other, persisting continuously for several weeks. Swelling and pain may occur near the affected area. When erysipelas occurs on the lower legs, it is prone to recurrence after healing, often leading to rough, thickened skin, lower limb swelling, and the formation of elephantiasis due to repeated episodes. Neonatal erysipelas often presents with erratic migration, extensive skin necrosis, and severe systemic symptoms. When erysipelas spreads from the limbs or head and face to the chest and abdomen, it is considered a contraindicated pattern. Newborns, the elderly, and those who are frail are prone to the intense invasion of fire-toxin, which can easily lead to the internal entrapment of toxic pathogens. This manifests as systemic symptoms such as high fever, restlessness, delirium, nausea, and vomiting, and can even be life-threatening. In Western medical treatment, methods such as antibiotic therapy for anti-infection combined with local cold and wet compresses with magnesium sulfate solution to reduce swelling and relieve pain are often employed. However, the efficacy in treating lower limb erysipelas of the damp-heat toxin accumulation type is not entirely satisfactory, and skin lesions often recur<sup>[4]</sup>. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) holds that lower limb erysipelas is caused by external exposure to fire-toxin and its accumulation. Treatment primarily focuses on clearing heat and detoxifying, often employing both internal and external treatment methods to improve the patient's condition<sup>[5]</sup>.

TCM believes that erysipelas is mostly caused by a fiery constitution, heat in the blood, and stagnation in the skin, or by the invasion of damp-heat fire-toxin pathogens through skin lesions, leading to stagnation and eruption in the skin. Externally, it presents as a red color resembling vermilion paint, while internally, it manifests as symptoms of excessive heat such as dry mouth, constipation, and restlessness<sup>[6]</sup>. Treatment primarily focuses on clearing heat, cooling blood, detoxifying, promoting diuresis, reducing swelling, and relieving pain<sup>[7]</sup>.

The classic TCM formula for treating erysipelas, Wuwei Xiaodu Yin (Five-Ingredient Decoction for Detoxification), originates from “Yi Zong Jin Jian” (Golden Mirror of Medicine). As a heat-clearing formula, it has the effects of clearing heat, detoxifying, and dispersing furuncles and carbuncles. It is indicated for the initial stages of furuncles and carbuncles, with symptoms such as fever and chills, grain-like lesions with deep and hard roots resembling iron nails, as well as abscesses, boils, and swellings with redness, swelling, heat, and pain, a red tongue with a yellow coating, and a rapid pulse. Clinically, it is also commonly used to treat acute surgical infections such as acute mastitis and cellulitis, as well as acute urinary tract infections, cholecystitis, pneumonia, and epidemic encephalitis B with heat-toxin syndromes.

## 2. Case study

During the process of apprenticing with the mentor, the authors encountered a patient. Through remote consultation, Professor Zhou treated the patient's erysipelas by applying Wuwei Xiaodu Decoction combined with the external application of Olibanum and Myrrh.

Medical Record: (Initial Consultation) Patient Li, female, 66 years old, presented to Botou Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital on October 10, 2024, primarily due to edema and pain in the right lower limb for half a

month. The patient exhibited significant edema and pain in the right lower limb, particularly below the right knee, accompanied by numbness, a sensation of coldness in the limbs, aversion to cold, insomnia, irritability, yellow urine, dry stools, a dark red tongue with a thick, yellow, and greasy coating, and a wiry and slippery pulse. The patient had a history of cerebral infarction 12 years ago, leaving residual symptoms of impaired mobility and numbness in the right limb after treatment.

Traditional Chinese medicine diagnosis: stroke

Western Medicine Diagnosis: Sequelae of Cerebral Infarction

Pattern Differentiation: Blood stasis obstructing the collaterals, with internal generation of cold and dampness.

Treatment Principle: Promote blood circulation to remove blood stasis, induce diuresis to alleviate edema, and clear heat to relieve irritability

Formula and Medication: Modified Xiaoxuming Decoction combined with Taohong Siwu Decoction

The specific prescription is as follows:

Prepared Aconite Root (Zhi Fuzi) 10 g, Ephedra (Ma Huang) 6 g, Cassia Twig (Gui Zhi) 10 g, Codonopsis Root (Dang Shen) 12 g, Bitter Apricot Kernel (Ku Xing Ren) 10 g, White Peony Root (Bai Shao) 10 g, Safflower (Cao Hong Hua) 10 g, Peach Kernel (Tao Ren) 10 g, Chinese Angelica Root (Quan Dang Gui) 12 g, *Ligusticum wallichii rhizome* (Chuan Xiong) 10 g, Rehmannia Root (Sheng Di) 15 g, *Spatholobus caulis* (Ji Xue Teng) 30 g, Cassia Seed (Cao Jue Ming) 20 g, Chrysanthemum Flower (Chu Ju Hua) 12 g, Bupleurum Root (Bei Chai Hu) 10 g, Salt-Processed Eucommia Bark (Yan Du Zhong) 12 g, Cyathula Root (Huai Niu Xi) 15 g, Mulberry Twig (Sang Zhi) 30 g, Polygala Root (Yuan Zhi) 6 g, Fried Sour Jujube Seed (Chao Suan Zao Ren, pounded) 16 g, Plantago Seed (Che Qian Zi) 15 g, Amber Powder (Hu Po Fen, taken with boiling water) 1.5 g. Add 500 ml of water, decoct to 250ml, and divide into two doses for administration. Take 14 doses of this Chinese herbal decoction.

Mr. Zhou believes that the patient's previous history of cerebral infarction, along with symptoms such as limb numbness, edema, pain, aversion to cold, and impaired mobility, are primarily caused by stagnation of qi and blood stasis in the meridians. Therefore, he applies the Minor Continuation Decoction (Xiao Xu Ming Tang) to dispel wind and cold, nourish qi, and warm yang; combined with the Peach Kernel and Red Peony Decoction (Tao Hong Si Wu Tang) to promote blood circulation and remove blood stasis. In addition to relieving exterior cold, the Minor Continuation Decoction can also penetrate deeply into the meridians to expel wind, cold, dampness, and phlegm, smooth the meridians, unblock the exterior and interior, open the bowels and relieve constipation, regulate qi, unblock blood, and remove blood stasis, thereby playing a role in warming yang, promoting blood circulation, removing blood stasis, and unblocking the meridians, without causing significant heat signs. Therefore, as long as there are syndromes such as deficiency of yang qi in the body, deficiency of spleen and kidney yang, dysfunction of the zang-fu organs caused by wind, cold, and dampness, struggle between pathogenic factors and vital qi, lingering pathogenic factors due to deficiency of vital qi, stagnation of qi mechanism, and obstruction by phlegm and blood stasis, modifications can be made to the Minor Continuation Decoction based on the specific symptoms, without being confined to the later debates on "internal wind", "external wind", "true stroke", and "stroke-like conditions." The basis should always be clinical evidence. Aconite Root and Cassia Twig warm and unblock yang qi, while Ephedra elevates clear yang and is combined with White Peony Root and Codonopsis Root to nourish qi and blood. Combined with the Peach Kernel and Red Peony Decoction, which focuses on removing blood stasis and is supplemented by nourishing blood and promoting qi circulation. In the prescription, the potent blood-breaking ingredients, peach kernel and safflower, are used as the main components, focusing on promoting blood circulation and removing blood stasis. Rehmannia root and Chinese angelica root, which are sweet and warm in nature, nourish yin, supplement the liver, enrich the blood, and regulate menstruation. Peony root nourishes the blood and

harmonizes the nutrient aspect of qi, enhancing the blood-replenishing effect. *Ligusticum wallichii* promotes blood circulation and qi movement, regulating and smoothing qi and blood to assist in the blood-activating function. The entire formula is well-coordinated, enabling the removal of blood stasis, the generation of new blood, and the smooth flow of qi. The significant characteristic of this formula is its ability to resolve stasis and generate new blood. It is supplemented with jujube kernel and polygala root to calm the mind and stabilize the will, plantago seeds to promote diuresis and reduce swelling, eucommia bark and cyathula root to strengthen tendons and bones and nourish the liver and kidneys, and chrysanthemum, cassia seed, and amber powder to clear heat and eliminate restlessness. When used in combination, the entire formula promotes blood circulation and removes blood stasis, promotes diuresis and reduces swelling, and clears heat and eliminates restlessness.

### 2.1. Second consultation

After taking the medication, the symptoms of lower limb pain were alleviated, and the edema was reduced. However, there was still local skin redness and swelling, with a slightly elevated skin temperature, accompanied by numbness and a feeling of coldness, insomnia, irritability, and constipation. The tongue was pale red with a yellow and greasy coating, and the pulse was wiry and slippery.

TCM Diagnosis: Erysipelas

Western Medicine Diagnosis: Acute Lymphangitis

Syndrome Type: Heat Accumulation in the Zang-fu Organs, Fire-toxin Aggregation

Treatment Principle Clear Heat and Detoxify, Disperse Furuncles and Carbuncles

Formula and Medication Modified Five-Flavor Disinfection Decoction

The specific prescription is as follows:

Honeysuckle 30 g, Wild Chrysanthemum 20 g, Dandelion 30 g, Purple Flower Violet 15g Forsythia 12 g, Scutellaria 12 g, Atractylodes 12 g, Phellodendron 10g Cyathula Root 15 g, Mulberry Twig 30 g, Patrinia 15 g, Plantago Seeds (wrapped for decoction) 15g Safflower 10 g, Red Peony Root 10 g, Rhubarb (added later) 5 g, Raw Licorice 10 g Seven doses of Chinese herbal medicine are prescribed. For each dose, add 500 ml of water, decoct to 250 ml, and divide into two portions to be taken separately.

For external use, grind myrrh and frankincense into powder, add vinegar, and apply externally to the affected area.

Mr. Zhou believed that the symptom was erysipelas, which was mostly caused by the stagnation of heat-toxin in the skin. The treatment primarily focused on clearing heat and detoxifying, as well as dispersing furuncles and carbuncles. In the prescription, honeysuckle and wild chrysanthemum were used to clear heat, detoxify, and resolve masses. Honeysuckle, entering the lung and stomach meridians, mainly resolved heat-toxin in the qi and blood of the upper and middle energizers, while wild chrysanthemum, entering the liver meridian, specifically cleared liver and gallbladder fire. The combination of these two herbs was effective in clearing heat accumulation in the qi aspect. Dandelion and violet both had the effect of clearing heat and detoxifying, and were important herbs for treating carbuncles and furuncles. Dandelion also had the additional function of promoting diuresis and relieving stranguria, clearing damp-heat in the lower energizer. When combined with violet, it was good at clearing heat accumulation in the blood aspect. *Begonia fimbriatipula* could enter the triple energizer and was adept at removing fire from the triple energizer. When used in combination, these herbs had a particularly strong effect in clearing and resolving heat-toxin, and could also cool the blood, disperse masses, and reduce swelling and pain. Forsythia, patrinia, and rhubarb cleared heat and detoxified; scutellaria and phellodendron cleared heat and resolved dampness; safflower and red peony root promoted blood circulation and removed blood stasis; plantago seed promoted diuresis and reduced swelling;

achyranthes bidentata tonified the liver and kidney and strengthened bones and tendons; and mulberry twig dispelled wind and dredged the collaterals. When used together, the entire prescription cleared heat and detoxified, as well as dispersed furuncles and carbuncles.

## 2.2. Third consultation

After taking 7 doses of the medication, the patient's lower limb pain was significantly relieved, edema reduced, local skin temperature returned to normal, and redness and swelling significantly improved. However, the patient still experienced numbness and a sensation of coldness, with normal sleep, occasional irritability and restlessness, and constipation. The tongue was pale red with a yellow and greasy coating, and the pulse was wiry and slippery.

Herbal Formula: 30 g of Honeysuckle Flower, 12 g of Forsythia Fruit, 12 g of Baikal Skullcap Root, 30 g of Poria Peel, 20 g of Dandelion Herb, 15 g of Patrinia Herb, 12 g of Viola Herb, 12 g of Achyranthes Root, 12 g of Chinese Angelica Root, 30 g of Kudzu Root, 12 g of Chrysanthemum Flower, 15 g of *Glabrous greenbrier rhizome*, and 10 g of Licorice Root. Seven doses of the Chinese herbal medicine.

For each dose, add 500 ml of water, decoct to 250ml, and divide into two servings. Continue to externally apply the powdered Olibanum and Myrrh mixed with vinegar to the affected area.

After taking the medicine internally and applying it externally, the patient's symptoms of redness, swelling, heat, and pain in the affected area significantly improved, but the patient still experienced numbness and coldness in the limbs. Therefore, the medication was adjusted to include Kudzu Root to promote blood circulation, relieve meridian blockage, and facilitate joint movement.

## 2.3. Fourth diagnosis

After taking seven doses of the medicine, the patient's symptoms of redness, swelling, and pain in the lower limbs were significantly alleviated, edema reduced, local skin temperature normalized, numbness and coldness slightly lessened, sleep returned to normal, occasional irritability and restlessness occurred, and bowel movements were not smooth. The tongue was pale red with a yellow and greasy coating, and the pulse was wiry and slippery.

Continue to take the above formula for another 14 doses. One month later, during the follow-up, all of the patient's symptoms had significantly decreased.

## 3. Commentary

Erysipelas is mostly caused by heat toxin stagnating in the skin, and the treatment focuses on clearing heat and detoxifying, as well as dispersing carbuncles and sores. The classic formula Five-Flavor Disinfecting Decoction originates from the "Surgical Heart Method Essentials Formula" in the "Yi Zong Jin Jian" (Golden Mirror of Medicine). Composition: Three qian of Honeysuckle Flower, one qian and two fen each of Wild Chrysanthemum Flower, Dandelion Herb, Viola Herb, and Purpleback Nightshade Seed. Add two cups of water, decoct to eight-tenths of a cup, add half a cup of ash-free wine, and bring to a boil two or three times before taking hot. The dregs should be decocted again in the same manner and taken. The criterion is to induce sweating by covering with quilts. In the prescription, honeysuckle and wild chrysanthemum can clear heat, detoxify, and dissipate masses. Honeysuckle enters the lung and stomach meridians, primarily resolving heat-toxin in the qi and blood of the upper and middle energizers. Wild chrysanthemum enters the liver meridian, specifically clearing liver and gallbladder fire. When these two herbs are combined, they excel at clearing heat-stagnation in the qi aspect. Dandelion and viola both possess the functions of clearing heat and detoxifying, serving as essential herbs for treating carbuncles, sores, and toxic

swellings. Dandelion also promotes diuresis and relieves stranguria, clearing damp-heat from the lower energizer. When paired with viola, it effectively clears heat-stagnation in the blood aspect. Begonia fimbriatipula can enter the triple energizer, effectively removing fire from all three sections. When used in combination, these herbs exhibit particularly strong heat-clearing and detoxifying effects, and can also cool the blood and dissipate masses to reduce swelling and pain. Modern pharmacological studies have shown that heat-clearing and detoxifying traditional Chinese medicines such as honeysuckle, dandelion, wild chrysanthemum, and viola have broad-spectrum antibacterial effects, inhibiting various pathogenic microorganisms, including Gram-positive bacteria, Gram-negative bacteria, fungi, and spirochetes to varying degrees<sup>[8-11]</sup>. The decoction of *Achyranthes bidentata* has the effect of dilating blood vessels in the lower limbs, significantly increasing blood flow to the lower extremities<sup>[12]</sup>. Adding a small amount of wine promotes blood circulation to enhance the therapeutic effects. Therefore, this prescription is often modified and used as the main treatment for various early-stage carbuncles and toxic swellings. Additionally, when traditional Chinese medicines are applied externally, the drugs enter the bloodstream through local percutaneous absorption, exerting systemic pharmacological effects. This method is clinically convenient to operate, avoids gastrointestinal irritation caused by drugs, and has low side effects<sup>[13]</sup>. Frankincense and myrrh are both traditional Chinese medicines that promote blood circulation and remove blood stasis. Frankincense is warm in nature, while myrrh is neutral. Both are pungent and bitter in taste, with a fragrant aroma, and enter the heart, liver, and spleen meridians. They have the effects of promoting blood circulation, dissipating blood stasis, reducing swelling, and relieving pain. When combined and applied externally to the lower limbs of patients with vinegar for modulation, their therapeutic effects are enhanced.

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