

Are Traditional Medicine and Phytotherapy the Same?

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Persian medicine is a school of traditional medicine, which is based on four elements (fire, air, water, soil/earth) and their attributed qualities (warmness, wetness, coldness, dryness) that make everything have a special temperament (hot and wet, hot and dry, cold and wet, and cold and dry). In fact, the temperament (*Mizaj* in Arabic) is a uniform quality that results from the ultimate interaction between different amounts of the four elements. Humor is the final product of digestion that occurs in the body of any living organism, whether a plant, an animal, or a human. We have four humors called *sanguine* (*Dam* in Arabic), *phlegm* (*Balgham* in Arabic), *yellow bile* (*Safra* in Arabic), and *black bile* (*Soda* in Arabic). The sanguine humor is associated with the hot and wet temperament; the phlegm humor is related to the cold and wet temperament; the yellow bile humor is connected with the hot and dry temperament; and the black bile humor denotes the cold and dry temperament. Consequently, each of these humors is attributed to an element (Figure 1). This holistic medicine is also known as "humoral medicine".

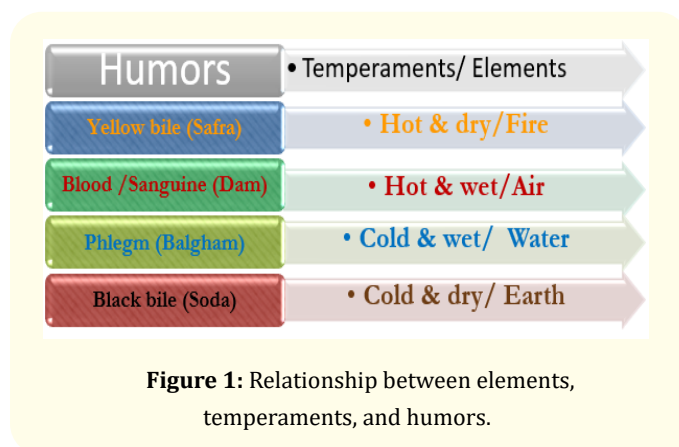


Figure 1: Relationship between elements, temperaments, and humors.

These are the main principals of every medical school, which is founded on the basis of humoral theory. Similar to Unani medicine or many other traditional medicines, Persian medicine is one of these holistic medical schools. In this medical viewpoint, a physician has to know all the features of every element and its attributed temperament and humor before suggesting any kind of treatment to the patient. It is important to mention that according to the humoral theory, diseases occur when the balance between the four qualities in the body is disturbed. The basis of treatment is to restore the balance between qualities by administering food or herbal medicines that have the opposite temperament [1].

In herbal medicine or phytotherapy, treatment is solely based on the phytochemical properties of the plant found in the laboratory or results obtained from clinical trials, regardless of the diseases' and plants' temperament. Without considering the temperament in phytotherapy, physicians may make a big mistake. For example, Amsterdam, et al.'s study showed that the chamomile is good to treat patients with generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) without considering the patient's and the herb's temperament. If GAD occurs in a patient with hot and dry temperament, then chamomile, which is of the same temperament, will worsen the patient's condition because of reinforced imbalance. As noted in the results of this study, one patient discontinued treatment for adverse events (abdominal discomfort) [2]. Perhaps this patient had a temperament similar to that of chamomile whereby s/he experienced adverse effects and complications. There is a huge number of studies that have examined the effects of different medicinal plants/herbs on different diseases regardless of the patient's or the disease's temperaments. In these studies, a number of patients fail to demonstrate a proper therapeutic response, and may even get worse, and thus abandon the study. Under such circumstances, a physician who is not familiar with the temperament concept cannot find the reason for the lack of response in these patients.

It is necessary to mention that in Persian medicine, there are some plants that are able to treat a disease in particular, regardless of the disease's or the patient's temperament. This is called *Belkhasieh* or *Zolkhasieh* in Arabic [3]. However, these plants are finite, and most of the medicinal plants have their own temperament and should be prescribed in terms of their ability to balance the qualities in the patient's body.

In conclusion, it is good that a traditional medicine specialist be familiar with the phytochemical properties of herbs for better treatment; similarly, it is useful for a phytotherapist to become familiar with temperaments so that s/he can prescribe better herbs for treating diseases. In that case, both physicians will be more successful.

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