

Editorial

Daniel Maxwell

Forget the Information Age, we have entered ... the Ozempic Era. Here in the UK more and more of my patients and friends who struggle with their weight have either started on – or want a Chinese medicine-informed opinion on – GLP-1 receptor agonist drugs (aka ‘fat jabs’ – the preposterously-named Ozempic, Wegovy, Mounjaro etc). As a dyed-in-the-wool Chinese medicine physician it irks me to admit it, but boy, do they work* (*after a fashion – see below). Take the example of my dear friend, a man of Pavarotti-esque appetites born with a cast-iron constitution, who has always been able to Hoover up more food, booze, drugs, money and sex than anyone I know. When he hit his late 40s, however, his *jing*-based free pass expired and the stress of multiple businesses, wives and children combined with his prodigious consumption to balloon his weight to epic proportions. Last year when I visited him, he had diminished considerably, courtesy of Mounjaro. His new lightweight frame was draped in slightly loose skin, and at meal times, rather than his hitherto frenzied wolfing, he instead pushed small amounts of food around his plate. The contrast was impressive as it was disconcerting.

As practitioners of Chinese medicine, how should we think about these new-jabs-on-the-block? (Acupuncture being the OG-jab of course). First, let us acknowledge what they bring to the banquet: There is no traditional East Asian medicine treatment that I know of that can reliably match this level of weight loss in such short time (at least, without a big change in the patient’s mind/emotions/behaviour). But before getting giddy with excitement about being able to have our cake and eat it, a quick trawl of the evidence tells us that for one person to avoid a heart attack requires 207 people to take GLP-1s, and 335 people need to take them to avoid one stroke (<https://tinyurl.com/yjjvwuyt>). Given that the price of admission to *Club Svelte* can be high – with side effects of nausea, fatigue, diarrhoea and/or constipation (amongst others) affecting over half of the people using them (<https://tinyurl.com/ydbcd7hp>), some caution seems to be required.



From a Chinese medicine perspective these drugs can be seen to resolve phlegm-dampness and clear voracious Stomach fire, but at the expense of damaging the Spleen and Stomach, stagnating the Liver and (especially in older, weaker patients) depleting blood and yang. In some ways they epitomise the difference between traditional Chinese medicine and biomedicine. The idea that everyone with a specific disease gets the same treatment is anathema to Chinese medicine – *tóng bìng yì zhì* and all that. That said, as Chinese medicine physicians we should be careful of taking the moral high ground on such matters: search the internet for ‘Chinese medicine for weight loss’ and you will be regaled by a chorus of herbs and acupuncture points being touted to overweight consumers. The question ‘Do you treat weight loss?’ demands a careful, nuanced answer. Medicine for weight loss sits at the uneasy intersection of human addiction, emotional suffering, greed, consumerism, industrial food production and Big Pharma. To successfully help a patient with food addiction, for example, it is generally necessary to go deep into their distressing psychoemotional imprints to uproot the damaging behaviour.

Given current levels of obesity (one billion of us, believe it or not: <https://tinyurl.com/4mfm2hkk>), these drugs are here to stay. That means a whole lot of middle jiao chaos and qi stagnation to treat while the jabs go scorched earth on the flab. Meanwhile, one year later my friend seems to have hacked the system. He has not regained all his weight, but is back to hoovering at mealtimes. In the Ozempic Era, suppressing appetite has become remarkably easy; to do so without creating further problems is more tricky. Chinese medicine has long known that 治病必求于本 (‘In treating disease, one must seek the root’). GLP-1s may be exceptionally effective at trimming the branches; our job, it seems, is to find and engage intelligently with what is feeding the root. 中