

Clara

My guest today is going to blow you away because this is the first time I have a non-TCM practitioner, although she does practice acupuncture. Her title is a naturopathic medicine doctor, so she's not a TCM practitioner per se, but she has so much knowledge and many nuggets to share. She comes to share with us, and we're going to talk about gut health.

The digestive system, which we know in TCM is at the center of our health, is so important. So Dr. Alex and I go back and forth, looking at it from the perspective of naturopathic medicine and the perspective of Chinese medicine. You are going to love all the information she shares with us because what she came to do today is to give us more tools to allow us to support our patients better.

I can't wait for you to meet her. Let's go.

Welcome to Acupro, a show dedicated to making Chinese medicine and acupuncture easy to grasp and fun to learn. Hi, I'm your host, Clara Cohen. I support practitioners and students like you in changing the world one patient at a time. My goal is to share my passion for TCM and empower you to achieve superior patient care.

I love showcasing the amazing benefits of acupuncture because, after all, acupuncture rocks!

Today, I'm so excited because I've got a guest who is not a TCM practitioner, but complements TCM very well and knows about TCM. So this is going to be an interesting conversation. So first of all, I would like to welcome my friend and colleague, Dr. Alex Dragon. She is amazing, and you are going to love her. Alex, welcome to Acupro.

Alex

Thank you so much. That's such a lovely intro.

Clara

I love working with naturopathic doctors, and Alex is a naturopathic doctor. So we're going to learn a little bit about how, as TCM practitioners, we can work alongside NDs and just help and support our patients the best way possible.

But before we do that, I want to introduce you so you know a little bit about Alex. She's in Canada, in British Columbia, like I am, and she practices in the Vancouver area.

She also focuses her practice a lot on gut health, which is what we're going to talk about today, and on women's health. She does a lot of acupuncture, including cosmetic acupuncture and microneedling. She is very well-versed in many ways, but she really enjoys gut health and she makes really good recipes.

I follow her on Instagram, and she always has great insights when it comes to recipes and meal preparation. There's so much we can unpack here. This is going to be fantastic. So before we start, I know you were an amazing student.

I know you have a word for that because you are very dedicated to your craft and you love what you do. Did you decide to start going back to school or to start going to school for naturopathic medicine?

Alex

I feel like every naturopathic doctor has a similar story to mine, and it's that I was struggling with my own health when I was in university. I was studying biology in Montreal, and I knew I wanted to pursue further education. I just didn't know what that was. I was considering nutrition or physiotherapy or something related to health and medicine.

I had gut problems since I was a child, IBS-like symptoms, and I just didn't feel like I was getting the answers I needed from the conventional sphere. They had conducted numerous tests and ruled out many things, but I was left with a diagnosis of IBS and lactose intolerance, with the advice to just deal with it.

So I began doing a lot of research, looking into acupuncture and other alternatives. I had never heard of naturopathic medicine before in my life. I come from a very conventional family; my mom's a nurse and my dad's an engineer, very straight arrow, following convention. Somehow, I stumbled upon naturopathic medicine and was intrigued. I looked into it, and it seemed so comprehensive. I could learn about nutrition, botanical medicine, as well as conventional medicine. It seemed to encompass everything I was interested in.

I was leaning towards that path and thought I should probably see someone before committing to all this schooling. So I visited a naturopath in Montreal, and she basically told me that I needed to work on my stress and my nervous system. That blew my mind

because no one had ever told me that before regarding my gut issues. I had always thought it was related to food or genetics. After that meeting, I knew immediately that this was what I needed to pursue.

I decided to go for it, got into school in Vancouver, and the rest is history. And now I'm here.

Clara

Yeah, and you graduated after four years. For those who don't know, the naturopathic program is four years, and you have to pass a license, just like we do with acupuncture. Then, of course, you can become a full-time doctor and open your practice. Now, what's interesting about you going to see a naturopath for me, from that TCM perspective, is that she emphasized the need to address your stress and emotional well-being.

That's so TCM; the causes of disease in TCM are often related to emotional stress, which can account for 70% of chronic issues. It could be years of the same emotion, like worry, overthinking, or trauma, leading to fear, anxiety, and other issues that eventually affect our gut at the cellular level and make us sick, basically.

Everyone who has had the opportunity to speak on stage, as I have, knows that feeling of anxiety in the pit of their stomach. That acute anxiety can make you feel like you're going to vomit, your stomach tied in knots. When that becomes chronic, it creates more and more issues. So it was really good that she pointed it out.

Because you have learned both sides of TCM, which is part of naturopathic medicine. One of the things I want to ask you is, what are the key components of naturopathic medicine when you treat patients? Obviously, one of them is looking at the root cause. Could you go into that?

Alex

Yeah, and I think what you're saying is like what the pillars are of naturopathic medicine, is that what you're saying?

Clara

Alex is bilingual, but you wouldn't know because when she speaks English, she doesn't have an accent like me. So when she says "pillars," I'm like, "Oh, she used such a great

word." I wish I had thought of that, but my vocabulary never goes into this. So thank you. So pillars.

I love that word. It's strong. Like a pillar. Go for it.

Alex

So we have six pillars in naturopathic medicine. I think some of them are similar to conventional medicine as well. But one of the first ones is "first do no harm." So I think that goes without saying, right? Same with acupuncture. You don't want to harm your patient. So that's the first one, goes without saying.

The second one is the healing power of nature. I think that also encompasses TCM, which is why acupuncture is a part of naturopathic medicine. Identifying and treating the root cause, figuring out why it's happening, and treating that so you don't have to treat the symptoms. "Doctor as teacher," educating our patients about their lifestyle, nutrition, etc.

"Treat the whole person," so not just fixate on one thing and isolate that, but actually look at everything that's going on in someone's life, and prevention. Looking at 10 years, 20 years from now, what's going to happen in your health and how can we prevent, maybe a genetic issue that's happening in your family, like heart disease. We want to prevent that. So those are our pillars. And then within each of those, obviously, you can dive deep and go into those. My favorite is "doctor as teacher" because I think that when people take their health into their own hands and they actually understand how they can help themselves day to day, then, I don't need a job anymore, which is not true, obviously I want to have a job, but people can then take that power back to themselves.

I think empowering patients is really key. And your six pillars are the same in TCM. This is why I love naturopathic medicine. When I decided to go back to school, I was hesitating between naturopathic medicine and TCM, so I will never regret what I did because I love TCM and it's such a passion, so I'm so glad I went into that field.

However, those two were really attractive to me because exactly what you just shared, the six pillars are exactly the same in both areas or in both medicines. And what I love is, I agree about educating patients. This is why I spend so much time on social media because together, and with other practitioners that share my content, we try to educate the world on what can empower patients to take action and to take charge of their own health.

Because up until a little while back, people just gave their health to their medical doctor and said, "Hey, this is my problem. Help me." But now it's okay, we are here to guide you. We are here to educate you and support you in that journey, but you are not going to get to the top of a mountain by me carrying you. You have to walk. I'll show you the way to the mountain, but you gotta walk. And when patients understand that, they feel so much more empowered and go, "Okay, what do I have to do?" And I think when people come and see naturopathic doctors, that's the first thing they ask. "What do you want me to do so I get better? You are going to tell me what to do and I'll go and do it." So I think that's fantastic.

Clara

Today we're going to talk about gut health. When someone comes in with a gut issue like you had growing up, and I think a lot of people have gut issues, and the root cause can be many. What is your first assessment? How do you go about it? What does it look like when patients come in?

Alex

So the first thing I like to do is ask people to tell me their story. In my intake form, I ask them to list their three main concerns, such as gut health, constipation, bloating, etc. Then, I delve deeper by asking about their bloating. When did it start? What was going on at that time?

People usually launch into their stories, like in 2019, when they moved across the country and experienced a stressful period, or when they went on vacation to Vietnam in 2016 and got a stomach bug. By understanding the timeline and the context, I can pick out the most important pieces to reverse engineer the problem and get back to the root cause. With gut issues, especially those labeled as IBS, it often goes back to childhood. So I even ask if their parents mentioned any issues like constipation or colic when they were babies.

Then, we dive into more in-depth questioning about bowel movements, stool volume, and symptoms. People may feel nervous talking about their poop, but it's an everyday conversation for me because it tells us a lot about what's going on inside. From there, we branch out into the nervous system, stress, sleep, daily activities, morning and nighttime routines, etc. There's a lot of questions that go into it, but I think the first thing is to open it up to the person so that I can get a sense of who they are as a person and their story.

Clara

By the way, did you have a free PDF for constipation? A PDF on TCM treatments for constipation? It'll be in the show notes below for you to grab if you haven't done so yet. Let's get back to the show.

I think that's fantastic because the more information you have, the better you can support your patients. You're absolutely right. And what's funny is often patients will say things like, "Is this too much detail?" And I'm like, no, give me the details. The more details, the better. And it's funny you talk about poop and bowel movements because when you ask people that question, "What does your stool look like?" They often say, "I don't know, I don't look." And I'm like, no way. And you mentioned that I always look at the stool of my dog because it gives me an indication. He's never going to complain if something is wrong or right. If I see blood coming out with liquid stool, I'm panicking right away.

Let's talk about poop! I love it. My question is, can you give us an idea of what the perfect poop looks like and what to look for when they're not perfect? What does it mean if your poop is super dry and looks like pellets, or if it's runny, green, floating, sinking, or whatever? Can you give us some details on the poop journey?

Alex

For sure. So the first thing we need to know is how often your bowel movements are happening, right? So the frequency, is it every day? Is it multiple times a day? Sometimes people with severe conditions can have up to 20 bowel movements a day. That's not normal. One to three movements a day I would consider normal.

But then you have to look at the consistency. Is it dry like deer pellets, rabbit pellets, hard poops, or is it pure liquid? We want something in the middle. Usually, we compare it to a snake or something smooth that's all together. A nice big sausage full volume. You should feel empty after you have your movement. You shouldn't feel like there's still something in there that I need to push out; that's not a completely emptied bowel. If you are having pellet poops, and the way we assess this is by something called the Bristol stool chart. It gives you an idea, from one to seven, of what your poo looks like and why it's that way.

If you're seeing dry little pellets, that usually indicates constipation. It means the stool is inside your colon for too long, and the job of the colon is to extract water. So the longer

it's in there, the more water is getting pulled out, making it harder for you to evacuate it. On the other end of the scale, if you're experiencing looser movements, it could be due to inflammation in the bowels, conditions like ulcerative colitis, Crohn's, or celiac disease, or even just having a flu. It could also be due to lack of fiber or underlying constipation. Many people don't realize that constipation doesn't just mean not going every day and having pellet poops; you can still have loose stools and have underlying constipation. It's our body's natural rhythm, wanting to get rid of waste.

I can do this. And this is why I often direct my clients to come and see you. And I'm like, okay, you need to go have X, Y, Z tests.

Clara

So can you talk about what tests can be done for different conditions, or what do you do to assess? There is an issue with the gut that is actually physical and not just emotional.

Alex

Yeah, there are a lot of different tests that we can do. So usually, this is based on symptoms again, with people telling me about their stool frequency, color, etc. And so the first thing that I always do is I want to rule out the insidious diseases. So things like cancer, right? That we want to make sure that we're not dealing with colorectal cancer.

That is a big one. Don't think that just because you're young, you can't have colorectal cancer. It's actually decreasing in age right now. Something called a FIT test, which basically tests for blood in the stool that you can't see because you can't always see the blood.

That tests for microscopic blood in the stool, and if that's positive, usually you'll get referred for a colonoscopy. That's something that I can't refer directly for as a naturopathic doctor. And then we go to the next kind of level. Of more insidious, I like to use that word because it's something that's not functional.

It's not like IBS, so IBD, which is ulcerative colitis and Crohn's as well as celiac disease. So those can be done through stool tests. You're checking for something that indicates inflammation in the gut, which is called fecal calprotectin. That's for IBD. For celiac disease, we are doing a blood test and that's checking for an antigen, which is an immune cell.

Basically, that tells us if you're reacting to gluten. And so once we've ruled those out, then we're looking at more functional disorders. So things like SIBO microbiome tests. And as naturopathic doctors, we have access to a lot of different testing. I tend to rely mostly on symptoms first and see if we can get somewhere with lifestyle changes and if.

We find that, that's not really working. Then we'll move into more in-depth testing. SIBO testing actually has taken a turn. It used to be more regular. It's a breath test that you blow into to see if you're producing certain gases by the bacteria. It's not actually recommended anymore because it's not super accurate.

So we're basing it purely on a clinical diagnosis, meaning every symptom that you're telling me, I'm assessing that, okay, it's not this, it's not this. We've ruled everything else out. It's most likely SIBO because the testing is prone to false positives and negatives. Microbiome tests. This is a poop test that basically tells us what kind of bacteria you have. Do you have parasites? Do you have bacteria? Those are also evolving, so they're always changing and getting better.

I don't think we're there yet. It's helpful, but it's not a perfect test. And then the other main one that I would say that I use a lot is H. pylori breath testing. So that's for things like gastritis or pain in the stomach, acid reflux. We want to make sure that it's not being caused by bacteria.

There are other tests that we can do, but those are the main ones that I'm using to assess someone's gut health.

Clara

This is why I like to refer patients to you, to naturopathic doctors because the more information we have, the more understanding we can support our patients, the more we can really help them. I'm limited with what I do because it'd be great to actually have knowledge, right?

Sometimes I have to send patients for blood tests and say, have you checked your hormone levels, reproductive hormone-wise, because if you don't, then we don't know where we start from. Yes.

We can conduct an assessment from a TCM perspective, but it would be great to have more information so we can all support you the best we can as your team, right?

Because there's a team of people that can support patients now, that's great because those are the tests. One of the things I want to talk to you about, and I thought it'd be a great segue here, is to talk about the diet. Of course, diet is important and how people eat, and if they're gluten intolerant or celiac or anything that's happening, we need to help them with their diet.

One of the things that I love about you is that you are a vegan. And your partner is so not, at the base, he's the opposite. He's a meat-eater. So I think that's very funny, and I want to understand why did you decide to go vegan? How do you feel being on a vegan diet versus not? Prior to, and then I'll share, NTCM perspective. It is viewed as, oh, vegan is too cold, right?

Because there's too much cold food with a vegan diet. There's not enough warm food because animal protein is warmer, or fish is warmer, etcetera, etcetera.

So I want to hear how is your body feeling cold versus hot, and why vegan.

Alex

I actually went vegan 10 years ago. My 10-year anniversary is this year, which is crazy to me. After watching a documentary, I watched this video, don't know why. I was just curious, and the next day I was vegan.

My veganism has evolved over time, and I'm not against meat eating or the consumption of animal products. I think my main issue is the mass production and the destruction of the environment that comes with that, as well as how we're treating the animals.

Obviously, when you have a big company, the same thing, your quality tends to go down versus a very small farm where you have your animals roaming around. And I also think that meat shouldn't be the center of our diet. I think that people can be healthy, and most of my patients are not vegan.

You can be healthy eating animal products. It's just, I think most people can stand to eat some more vegetables. Most people are vegetable deficient, fruit deficient. They're okay in the meat and dairy category. So when I originally went vegan, I immediately felt amazing. I felt so much lighter, less bloating.

Actually, I could feel like I wasn't as heavy after eating a meal. And it was easy for me because I didn't really enjoy meat. It was just part of the meal. My parents would make

it, it was on the plate, okay, I eat it. But I think I've just made to be not a meat eater. I'm okay without it. I do things to modify the coldness of the diet. I actually did do raw vegan one time for two weeks. It was in the summertime though, so it was a little bit easier, and I felt really great.

But I don't think that's attainable or achievable in the winter, especially in Canada. So what I do is I eat mostly cooked. I don't really eat a lot of raw foods, which I find is better for my digestion. I add a lot of warming spices as well. So ginger, garlic, cinnamon, things like that kind of warm the dish even in smoothies like adding ginger or cinnamon.

And I focus on having a variety of different foods. I think like you mentioned with the avocados, having things every day, people tend to get hyper fixated or they're used to eating the same things over and over. But variety is the spice of life, and when it comes to gut health, eating a variety of different foods is what is going to fertilize your gut the best.

So I feel really great on a vegan diet, but I don't think that it is for everybody and everybody is different, and their level of tolerance of fiber and vegetables and the amounts of meat and dairy they can consume is different for every person.

Clara

So what's interesting is like you growing up I did not like the taste of meat. It was more the texture. I did not like chewing. It felt like I was chewing muscles and I just didn't like that. And my mom would just put vegetables let's say a piece of chicken, some vegetables, on my plate.

And I would eat everything and then I would take a bite of the chicken and chew that same bite for 20 minutes trying to swallow it. And it would take forever. And my mom eventually, when I was eight, said, you know what? I'm done with this. I can't just have you sit at the table two hours just to finish this meat.

So my mom decided I'm not gonna force you anymore. And so I stopped eating meat. However, I love fish. So because it's soft, you know, it doesn't have that texture. I do eat fish three, four times a week, and I don't eat meat again because I don't like the texture. So I think I. It's also because we're talking about gut health, sometimes you just have to listen to your gut. What does it tell you inside? What does your body feel like? You said I felt so good after.

What do you feel like when you try different ways and if you feel really good and you eating? Healthy food, then it's going to be really good for you at this stage in your life. And I think that's what we need to do is experiment and figure out listening to our gut, literally at the gut level. I'm glad you share that.

Because of this, I want to segue into my next question, and I would love to hear you talk about the relationship between the gut and the brain.

So can you talk about the gut-mind connection?

Alex

Yes, totally. And actually bringing it back to what you said before about TCM, all the emotional problems that lead to internal problems or stress, right? Chronic stress and emotional issues lead to problems or imbalances in the body. I think that TCM being such an old form of medicine, conventional medicine is now catching up and being like, oh yeah, there is a gut-brain axis.

This does exist. And so the way I think about it is like a bidirectional highway between your brain and your gut. You're sending messages from your brain to your gut and from your gut to your brain.

So you have this highway and there's certain things that can block that highway. So sometimes this is hard to figure out because a lot of people with gut problems also have anxiety or stress or emotional problems, and teasing out what came first is very hard. So we have to work on both sides. We can't just work on the anxiety or the stress or just the gut.

We have to do both at the same time in order to fix the problem.

So with the gut-brain access, there are certain things that can reduce its function or your ability to receive those messages. So something like skipping a bowel movement, right? So I think about kids who are out of their routine or they don't like to go to the bathroom at school or they go on a field trip and they feel the urge to go poo, but they don't because they're not comfortable.

It's super common and I find this pattern a lot in patients where they say that they had a history of that they didn't want to go elsewhere. They were only comfortable in their own home and that shuts down the messaging from your brain because your gut is saying, oh, we're not releasing, and then your brain says, oh, okay.

actually changed how I frame nutrition aspects in my consults and with my patients to be more of an abundance mindset, right?

We're not removing things we're adding good things. Now, in certain instances, we do have to remove certain foods because they're actually causing harm to the body. For example, if someone's lactose intolerant, they're having a glass of milk and they have diarrhea right after, it's pretty easy to say that, you should probably cut down on the milk, but.

Most of the time it's about adding all of the good stuff. And once you start adding foods and you feel better, it makes it easier for you to do away with, the extra condiments or the sauces or the oils or whatever, or trying to cut down on. But if you go right away with a restrictive mindset, like you can't eat any of these things and then give them a list.

It's not sustainable and no one can stick to that. I can't even stick to that. So I always think about even in my own gut health journey of what can I add to improve my gut health instead of what can I remove?

Clara

That's such a great point. I really appreciate you sharing that. 'cause that's a really good way to start. Okay. I'm gonna give you more, not take away. I'm gonna finish with what three key takeaways you could give Chinese medicine practitioners or students that could help in their practice to support the patients when it comes to gut health.

Alex

The first one I can think of right away is don't be afraid to ask questions. Sometimes people, I seem uncomfortable when they're talking, especially about things like poo or their gut. They're not used to talking about those things.

You're the practitioner and so your comfort rubs off on the patient, and if you're comfortable talking about it, they're gonna be more comfortable and then you're gonna get more information that will help you to help them, right? Number two, I would say, again, going back to the pillars, treat the whole person when you're doing acupuncture. I think this goes without saying, but don't just look at their main concern and try to find that root. As you said, Clara, you know if you have spleen, QE deficiency and liver cheese stagnation.

Treat everything because that's gonna enhance your treatment protocol. And number three, I would say, is also don't be afraid to refer your patients out to other practitioners because people get better when they have a team. And I love utilizing acupuncturists, osteopaths, RMT, everything, you name it. The more people are working and looking at this person, the more perspective you get and usually the person gets better faster.

Clara

That was fantastic. Three key points. And the last one I love because I see a lot of practitioners or new practitioners afraid of sharing patients because they think the patient's not gonna come back to them. And that's a misconception because the more you have a team that is going to support the patient, the more the patient's gonna be so thankful they're gonna refer everyone to you.

So it is such a great way to look at it. Madame Alex Dragon, it's been such a pleasure. I'm so glad you came in to talk about gut health from a naturopathic medicine perspective, and I really appreciate you taking the time to come and share your knowledge with us.

So thank you so much for being on the Acupro Show today.

Alex

Thank you so much. Anytime I get to talk to Clara from Acupro is a dream, so it's completely my pleasure to chat with you.

Clara

You are so sweet. Now, where can people find you? If they need to reach you, we'll put their link in the show note, but what's the best place to get ahold of you?

Alex

The best place I would say is either my Instagram or my website. So my Instagram is @dralexdragan and my website is www.dralexdragan.com. All of my links are there on my Instagram and on my website.

Clara

Thank you, Alex.

Alex

Thank you so much.

Clara

Thank you so much for spending your time with me today. I truly hope you benefited from this episode, and I would love for you to share it with a friend that may benefit from it as well. Follow the show, leave a review, and if you want more, go to my website acuproacademy.com. I have tons of resources there with treatment protocols, case studies, free courses, and so much more.

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