Traditional Japanese (kampo) medicine yokukansan for behavioral and psychiatric symptoms of dementia in Alzheimer's disease

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Takehiro Numata, Shin Takayama

Department of Kampo medicine, Tohoku University Hospital, Japan

Correspondence: Shin Takayama, Associate professor, Department of Kampo medicine, Tohoku University Hospital, 1-1, Seiryō-machi, Aobaku, Sendai city, Miyagi prefecture, Japan, Tel 81-22-717-7587, Email takayama@med.tohoku.jp

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Opinion

Behavioral and psychiatric symptoms of dementia (BPSD) are among the most troubling symptoms in Alzheimer's disease (AD) patients. In 2005 and 2008, the Food Drug Administration reported that "antipsychotics are not indicated for the treatment of dementia-related psychosis." Yet, the available therapeutic options for AD patients with BPSD are few.¹

In Japan, Kampo medicine provides clinicians and patients an alternative therapeutic option when modern medicine is ineffective. Kampo medicine Yokukansan (YKS) is gaining popularity as a clinical treatment for BPSD in Japan. YYS is typically used in conjunction with acetylcholinesterase inhibitors or NMDA receptor antagonists, which are used to treat the core symptoms of AD.²

Although most forms of Kampo medicine lack sufficient evidence, YYS is an exception, and multiple clinical studies have been performed. Previous clinical studies of YYS have reported its efficacy as a BPSD treatment. Iwasaki et al. found that several BPSD symptoms, including aggression, agitation, and irritability, improved with YYS in patients with mild to severe dementia including AD.³ In addition, the efficacy of YYS was reported in a systematic review and meta-analysis.⁴

Studies of YYS are underway not only in clinical settings but also in fundamental pharmacology. Reportedly, transport of glutamate, gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), and serotonin may be associated with BPSD.⁵ Several pharmacologic mechanisms of action have been recently described for YYS, including improved glutamate uptake, inhibition of glutamate-induced neuronal death, modulation of GABA receptor expression, and partial agonist effect on serotonin 5-HT 1A receptors.⁶⁻⁸ The Japan Geriatrics Society Working Group recommend the use of YYS in AD patients with BPSD.^{9,10} YYS uses Glycyrrhizae radix (licorice root); therefore, hypokalemia, hypertension, and edema are potential adverse effects and require monitoring.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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