

Galenic Humours In Clinical Practice

Notes For Practitioners

by Christopher Hedley, FNIMH

Introduction

All traditional systems of medicine include a classification of people by types. Systems differ in the way they 'cut the cake' of humanity, and in their cultural expression, but the thinking and the methods of application are essentially the same. The only system without a functioning typology is that of modern, western biomedicine, the old ecto/ endo/ meso/ - morphic classification having fallen from favour with the rise of disease-centered thinking. Humoural systems are person-centered.

The classification of persons by four humoural types belongs to cultures of the temperate zones. It arises naturally from contemplation of the changes brought about by the four seasons. The Hippocratic school of ancient Greece (around 400 BCE) contributed a lot to the general discussion but the system was laid down in a formal manner by the physician and philosopher Galen in the 2nd century CE. Galen had been an army doctor and was systematic and not a little dogmatic. His thinking dominated European medicine until the 17th century. Galenic medicine was also taken up by the medical schools of the medieval Islamic tradition and is still practiced in Asia as Unani-Tibb.

Its underlying patterns persist in European thought - albeit mostly at a subconscious level - and can easily be reactivated in patients. Most patients have an intuitive understanding of what it means to be Fiery, Airy, Earthy or Watery and one quick way of impressing them with your insight and erudition is to point out a few things that they like to do, based on your analysis of their humoural balance. Fortunately this is relatively easy to do with sick people. Chronic illness is always rooted in humoural imbalance and the imbalance is almost always in the direction of a dominant humour.

I have written here about my experience of applying, or attempting to apply, this classification to modern western herbal practice. I owe my basic knowledge to Nicholas Culpeper and to a traditional English, liberal education but all interpretations are, essentially, my own. Readers may well disagree on certain points but I pray they stay with me. What matters is that we acquire useful tools to help us in our practice. These tools may be basically the same but they will be shaped to fit our own hands.

Why Use Galenic Humoural Theory in Modern Herbal Practice?

Humoural theory helps the practitioner to appreciate their patients as individuals, to come to grips with the

different ways that disease processes manifest in individuals. It is basically a physiological, rather than a pathological approach - one which is well suited to herbal practice and the use of gentle remedies.

I find that humoural theory helps me to understand my patients. It helps me express myself in terms which the patients can understand and relate to. Humoural language is still common and allows people to comprehend their experience of health and disease on a visceral level. Patients recognize the "rightness" and "truth" of this language where more cerebral medical explanations mean less to them. Humoural theory helps me to understand and treat disease processes as they are manifested within each individual patient. It helps me to adapt my herbs and strategies to the individual before me.

Maintaining Humoural Balance

People with a dominant humour tend to lead a life which builds on that humour. Fiery people tend to do fiery things, watery people watery things and so on. We play to our strongest hand but each humour has its own, necessary function and its own place. Illness arises when one humour (usually the dominant one) accumulates to excess, overflows its place and upsets the balance of the other three.

People with a relative excess of one humour should avoid those things which feed that humour. People with two, evenly dominant humours need to make sure that both are fed. One course is to cultivate different areas of life for different humours. For example, I often see Fire and Water disharmony in practice. Such people might cultivate fire in their work and water in their social life.



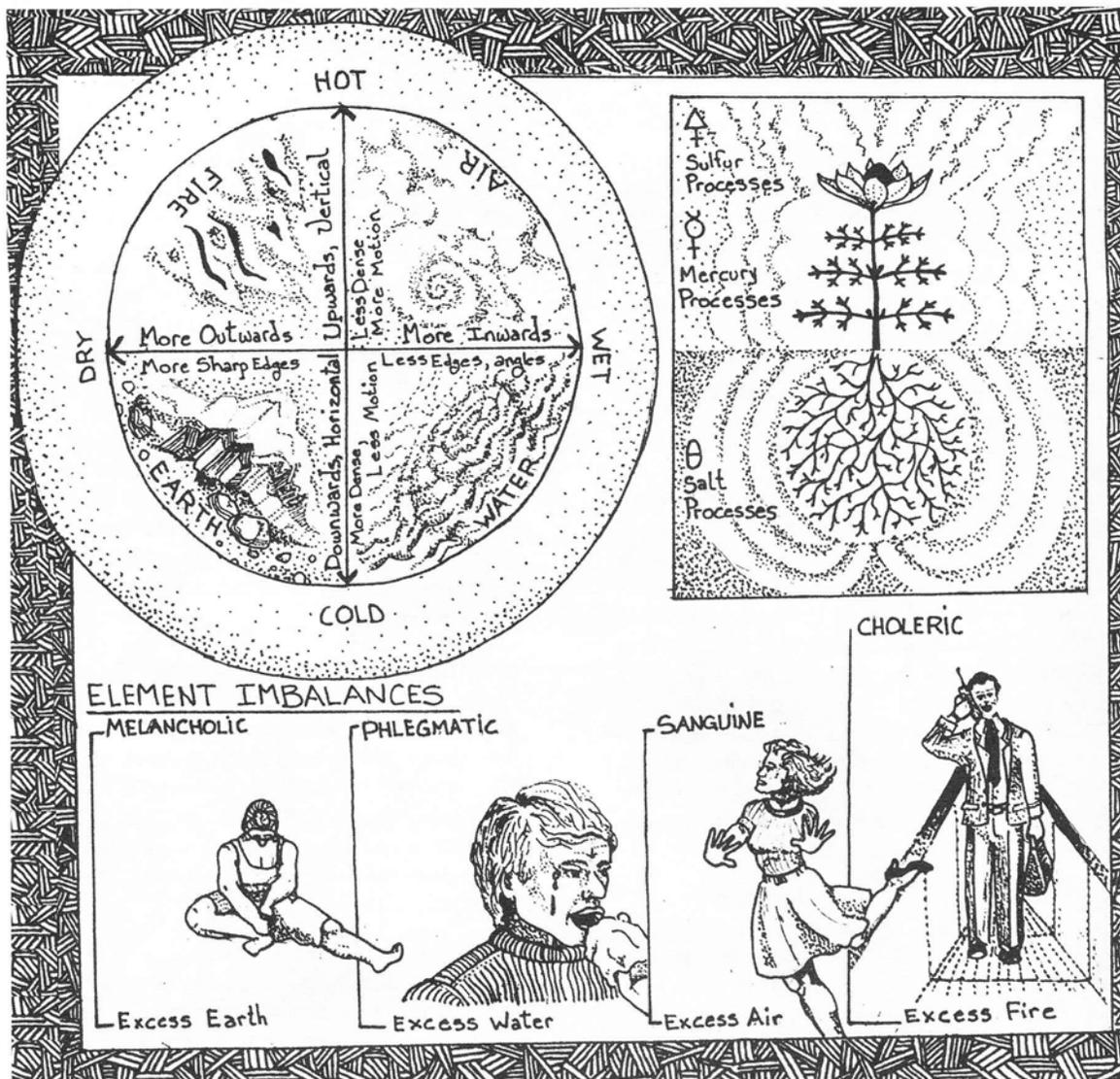
Christopher Hedley

Chris Hedley started selling herbs by harvesting "weeds and home-made teas and preparations" in the early 70's. He studied at the (then) School of Herbal Medicine and joined the NIMH in 1983, becoming a Fellow in 1999. With many years teaching experience in the UK, he was Chair of post-graduate training for the NIMH for 8 years. He lives in London, where he also teaches Phytomedicines and clinical training at Westminster University.



Martin Wall

Arctium lappa (burdock)



Jill Stansbury

People with three dominant humours are best considered as having a relative deficiency of the fourth humour. They should do those things that cultivate that humour. Ideally we build a good relationship with all our humours so that we may access each of them according to need.

The Choleric Humour

Demands our attention first – not just because it is more pushy but because it is the easiest to recognize from external characteristics [and translates well across cultural boundaries]. I don't see many sick choleric people. They notably hate being ill, are dreadful patients and cut out the memory of previous illnesses. Those patients who forget a major illness they had just last week, until you ask specifically, are most likely to be choleric.

FIRE is hot and dry, short, sharp and shiny.

Signs of Excess: Hot and dry digestion, acidity, constipation, thirst, jaundice, sour taste in mouth, nausea, bilious vomiting, sudden anger, poor sleep, high fevers, carbuncles, acne and accidents. The Choleric humour tends to rise in adolescence and summer. A classic case is the young man working in speculative banking who drinks spirits to excess and then asks for the hottest curry on the menu.

Avoid: Fatty and spicy foods, fatty meat, salty and dry foods, stimulants, alcoholic spirits, excess wine and an excess of competitive sports - but forced inactivity will cause fire to burn out and lead to the 'Burnt Choler' type of depression. This can happen in retirement and I often see it in students who force themselves to sit still reading books – thus neglecting their preferred sporting activity.

Take: Fish and wild meats, beer and cider, soups with barley, summer fruits such as raspberries, sufficient water, regular exercise and vapour baths. Regular cleansing regimes such as short fasts or eating only light food for a few days are helpful. Cultivate respect for an authoritative figure and exercise self discipline. Choleric people appreciate discipline and make good soldiers. Always have a project on the go, preferably one with clear aims that doesn't take too long.

Useful Herbs: Cooling and softening herbs such as *Viola odorata* (violets), *Malva neglecta* (mallows) and *Plantago major* (plantains). Herbs that clear heat from the liver and digestive system such as *Filipendula ulmaria* (meadowsweet) and *Rheum officinale* (rhubarb root). Herbs that clear heat from the skin such as *Arctium lappa* (burdock root) and *Rumex crispus* (yellow dock). Herbs that protect the heart from excess heat such as *Leonurus cardiaca* (motherwort) and *Melissa officinalis* (lemon balm). Choleric people often react badly to *Valeriana officinalis* (valerian), and cooling sedatives such as *Lactuca quercina* (wild lettuce) and *Humulus lupulus* (hops) are usually more appropriate.

Relating to Choleric People

They respond to discipline, direction and clearly stated, short term goals.

Case; A 45 year-old choleric man, who worked hard in the period before Christmas and ignored all warming signs of illness. As soon as the holidays started he fell ill, delirious and with a very high temperature. He would not take any medicine. In the end his wife made up a very concentrated decoction of *Eupatorium perfoliatum* (boneset) and poured it down his throat. His fever broke straight away. She could have used the native *Eupatorium cannabinum* but they live in a dry place, suitable to their temperament, where it does not grow. All *Eupatorium* species are cool diaphoretics.

Case; A 28 year-old man with dominant Choleric and Phlegmatic humours, heavily into club culture and a range of recreational drugs. He was one of my first patients and came to me for a 'detox'. I laid down a short, sharp regime, backed up with liver cleansing herbs, which he followed scrupulously. He was very quickly better. For several years he followed a pattern of excess and detox, coming to see me only when he needed to sort himself out again. Of late he has settled down and started nursing training. Nursing should suit him admirably, provided he finds a position with some autonomy, but the modern, academic style training has given him high blood pressure - only when he is studying! It disappears when he is working in a hospital on placement. Treatment was simply circulatory support,

pointing out that the course will soon be over and reminding him to exercise.

The Phlegmatic Humour

This comes next so we can compare the opposites.

Water: is cold and wet, passive, pale and practical. The classic 'English Temperament' is phlegmatic - from living in a cold damp place.

Signs of Excess: Lethargy, weight gain, especially around the thighs and buttocks leading to the traditional pear shape. Poor digestion, bloating, sore sides, excess mucus, coughs and blocked sinuses, pelvic congestion and poor circulation. Phlegm tends to increase in old age and in winter.

Avoid: Excess sleep and slothfulness, eating too much, fish (except with warming herbs), milk products, ice cream, sweet foods, salty foods, raw foods, salads (except with spicy or garlic dressings), pears and summer fruits. The traditional English diet included lots of warming spiced meat and astringent pickles. The traditional cooking of any country will be found to balance the excesses of that country's climate. Modern, fast food will, of course, be the death of us all.

Take: Warming foods such as onions and garlic and cooked foods. Astringent (dry) foods such as globe artichokes and cabbages. Warming wine and root vegetables. Fast at the change of seasons and get into the habit of adding gentle spices to foods. Regular, gentle exercise and co-operative ventures with your peers. Avoid getting caught up in emotional introspection - find creative ways of expressing deep emotions.

Useful Herbs: Gentle spices, especially *Cinnamomum verum* (cinnamon), *Elettaria cardamomum* (cardamom), *Coriandrum sativum* (coriander), *Foeniculum vulgare* (fennel) and *Zingiber officinale* (dried ginger). Gentle astringents such as *Agrimonia eupatoria* (agrimony) and *Sambucus canadensis* (elder flowers).



Matricaria recutita (German chamomile)

Martin Wall

Warm, dry herbs such as *Thymus vulgaris* (thyme), *Salvia officinalis* (sage) and *Rosmarinus officinalis* (rosemary). *Urtica dioica* (Nettles) are especially beneficial. Take nettles and *Galium aparine* (clivers) in the spring and warming herbs in the autumn.

Relating to Phlegmatic People

They are prone to poor digestion [on all levels], mucus accumulation and lethargy.

Case; A young Australian woman who had come to England for a short visit and was still here six years later. She came to my adult education class and sat quietly at the back listening to the exposition of humours. During one lesson I recommended nettle for stinging phlegmatic people into action. She took nettle tea for one week and then suddenly bought a ticket to return home. Australia should be a better climate for her.

Case; A 35 year-old phlegmatic woman having difficulty conceiving. She was otherwise in good health, although prone to congestive menstrual pains. She had already worked out that milk products did her no good but she was eating too much raw food in the belief that this was a healthy regime. I changed her diet to a warmer, more nourishing one and gave her a lady's mantle tea (*Alchemilla xanthochlora*) and *Capsicum annuum* (cayenne tincture) to take regularly in drops. This worked.

The Sanguine Humour

They always get the best press in this society as they tend to do most of the writing.

Air is hot and wet, mobile and changeable. It can be a hurricane or a breeze. In Galenic medicine it is the blood humour and problems are related to too much movement or too much blood.

Signs of Excess: Head full of confused and unquiet thoughts, hypochondria and anxiety, inflammatory conditions, putrefaction (if excess dampness), face red and swollen, sweet taste in the mouth, heavy body, 'a beer belly', heavy feeling behind the eyes, stretching and yawning, drowsiness, mouth ulcers, boils, easily fatigued, erratic circulation. The Sanguine humour is dominant in infants and tends to increase in spring.

Avoid: Excess of all kinds, especially rich food, alcohol and sex. Being too scattered - too many different things on the go. Damp and heating foods such as honey, wine and mead. Excess of concentrated foods such as dried fruit and sugar and garlic and onions in excess. Sanguine people have good digestion and don't need to worry too much about what they eat - only about eating too much.

Take: Beer and cider. Water and soups with barley. Vinegar and pickles. Wild meats, fish, salad and summer fruits. Regular exercise in company and co-operative sporting activity. Cultivate esteem and love for one person or find an enduring, central interest to life. Allow positive expression of excess air by singing, writing or expressing ideas. Eat regular meals and avoid eating between meals.

Useful Herbs: Calming and centering herbs such as *Matricaria recutita* (chamomile), *Tilia platyphyllos* (linden) and *Avena sativa* (oats). Chamomile is almost obligatory for sanguine types. *Valeriana officinalis* (Valerian) combined with *Scutellaria lateriflora* (skullcap) or *Passiflora incarnata* (passion flower) leaves for anxiety. Herbs to protect and balance the circulation such as *Crataegus laevigata* (hawthorn berries) and *Vaccinium myrtillus* (bilberries).

Relating to Sanguine People

They tend to worry about their health and respond to authoritative direction.

Case; A man aged 45, an opera singer, with recurrent varicose ulcers and constipation. I used straightforward circulatory and digestive herbs and simple healing dressings which were successful in a very short time. After 3 months, however, he had gone back to his old indulgences and the ulcers had come back. He was unwilling to change his lifestyle permanently and signed off treatment, considering the ulcers an acceptable risk.

Case; A fit and healthy 24 year-old with a reoccurring worry about his heart, so much so that his blood pressure would go up as I took it. It was never possible to get an accurate blood pressure; even the hospital gave up. He had perfect ECGs, ate well and exercised regularly. All he really needed was reassurance and I was grateful for my in depth training in modern medical science, which enabled me to sound very authoritative. All his problems vanished when he got married and had children. This gave him something outside himself to worry about and the company of people of his own mentality (his children).

The Melancholic Humour

This comes last, which is only what a Melancholic person would expect.

Earth is cold and dry, stolid, sad and stubborn.

Signs of Excess: Anxiety, false appetite (e.g. chocolate excesses), urine thick and dark, nightmares, congestion and bearing down pains, irregular heart beat (melancholy affects the heart), liver congestion with feelings of fullness or burning around the solar plexus, weariness, bitter belching, stiff painful joints, itchy

skin, back and hip pains. Melancholy tends to increase in middle age and in autumn.

Avoid: Excess food. Heavy foods such as beef. Drying foods such as lentils and an excess of astringent foods such as apples and quinces. Eating late in the day. Narcotics. Thinking too much and getting caught in introspection. Lack of physical activity.

Take: Light but nourishing foods such as light breads, soft cheeses, shellfish, eggs, lamb, olive oil, root vegetables and dried fruits. Cleansing foods such as asparagus, fennel and celery. Prolonged, gentle exercise such as long walks, hikes and gardening. 'Earthy' activity which has an end product such as pottery. Regular long baths with relaxing oils such as lavender. Cultivate the friendship of a sanguine person and always have a big, long-term project on the go - one which requires deep thought but also gets 'you out of yourself'.

Useful Herbs: Gently warm, moving and cleansing herbs such as *Foeniculum vulgare* (fennel), *Angelica archangelica* (angelica), *Coriandrum sativum* (coriander leaves), *Petroselinum crispum* (parsley) and *Juniperus communis* (juniper berries). Herbs for liver congestion such as *Berberis vulgaris* (barberry bark) and *Taraxacum officinale* (dandelion root and leaf). Herbs to clear melancholy from the heart such as *Borago officinalis* (borage) and *Leonurus cardiaca* (motherwort). *Symphytum officinale* (Comfrey) cream for dry skin. *Valeriana officinalis* (Valerian) combined with *Tilia platyphyllos* (linden) for anxiety.

Relating to Melancholic People

They are prone to getting blocked and stuck, but at least they will hang in there!

Case; A man aged 45, a writer and astrologer with creative block. Erratic diet and vegetative lifestyle. I recommended warm moving herbs (including angelica and fennel), a light diet and regular long walks. When I mentioned long walks he was reminded that this was a favorite occupation of his youth. People often gravitate towards exercise suitable for their body type and just need reminding how much they enjoy it. I also recommended gardening, which has proved of long-term benefit. For the writer's block I gave clary sage (*Salvia sclarea*) essential oil to burn as part of a simple ritual before settling down to work. This worked and a book was produced. Mind you it is so dense with ideas that it has taken me some years to read it.

Case; Man aged 39, acupuncturist with hepatitis C, possibly for 15 years. No symptoms except loose bowels and low alcohol tolerance - but he feels this predates the hepatitis C. His mother had the same. Fit and

energy good. Obvious melancholic temperament; sallow skin, slight build and prone to melancholia. Most of the consultation consisted of an exploration of the melancholic temperament. He appreciated this as it gave him a new insight on how he could manage his life in general and his condition in particular. It is always interesting to talk to people from other traditions and compare insights. His lifestyle was appropriate except that he tended to indulge in high adrenaline sports, and had a number of injuries as a result. Such exercise is more fitting for choleric types but other constitutions may use this strategy to try and raise their fire - fire being valued in this society. I recommended gentle jogging and gave liver herbs including *Cynara scolymus* (artichoke) for gentle cleansing and *Inula helenium* (elecampane), which is a warming and demulcent remedy traditionally used for warming the liver. We arranged to meet every quarter for assessment, a strategy which melancholic people appreciate. On his second visit he remarked that his 'mission this year is to be myself' - a fine conclusion for a melancholic type.

Note

Melancholy is the least valued humour in this society as it centers on 'being' rather than 'doing'. "Melancholy" was once regarded as an essential component of humanity but these days it is all too often treated as 'depression' and depression is more or less treason in this society as it interferes with what we deem to be production. It is very beneficial to point out to melancholic people that they NEED the space to just be.

Humours and Society

Modern society is Sanguine dominant and values only Airy virtues. It is allowable to be somewhat Choleric - although women of fire are not much appreciated. Phlegmatic virtues are ignored and Melancholic virtues regarded as almost treason and usually treated as 'depression'. If we wish to be of real help to our patients then we should work on restoring the humoral balance of society as a whole. Quietness, introspection, simply sitting and being, respect for tradition and relating directly to the earth are all desperately needed. Fortunately herbal medicine provides all these and more!