The Chinese Medical Causes & Mechanisms of Enuresis

In Chinese medicine, enuresis is seen as a disorder of water fluids. The three main viscera which control water fluids in the body are the three main Chinese medical viscera involved in enuresis—the lungs, spleen, and kidneys. The lungs are the upper source of water which downbear and diffuse water fluids through the water passageways of the three burners. It is the descension and free flow of the lung qi which transports water fluids to the lower burner for excretion by the kidneys and bladder. The spleen governs the movement and transformation of the water fluids. In particular, it is the spleen which sends the clear part of water fluids taken in by the stomach up to the lungs for distribution around the body. If the spleen qi fails to upbear these fluids, they tend to pour downward to the lower burner where they overflow from the bladder. The kidneys govern the water fluids of the entire body but especially control the bladder’s qi transformation and the opening and closing of the urethra. If, for any reason, one or more of these viscera become vacuous and insufficient or their function is inhibited by the presence of evil qi, their control of water fluids may be impaired and enuresis may result. Further, if water fluids collect and transform into dampness, these damp evils may seep downward to become depressed in the lower burner where they inhibit the free flow of the yang qi. If the yang qi, which is inherently warm, also becomes depressed and dampness unites with this depressed yang qi, it will give rise to damp heat. Because the liver channel surrounds the genitourinary tract, liver channel damp heat may be the result, and this may also cause enuresis.

In Chinese medicine, children are considered both physically and physiologically immature. Chao Yuan-fang, in his book *Zhu Bing Yuan Hou Lun (Treatise on the Origins & Symptoms of Various Diseases)* stated, “The five viscera and six bowels are made but
not complete, . . . are complete but not strong.” Similarly, Qian Yi, China’s first great pediatrician, in his *Xiao Er Yao Zheng Zhi Jue (A Collection of Essential Pediatric Patterns & Treatments)*, wrote, “The skin and hair, muscles and flesh, sinews and bones, brain and marrow, the five viscera and six bowels, the constructive and defensive, and the qi and blood of children as a whole are not hard and secure.” This means that the lungs, spleen, and kidneys are all immature and, therefore, intrinsically vacuous and weak. This is why babies and young children tend to present so many signs and symptoms of dampness, phlegm, and turbidity, i.e., untransformed water fluids. In particular, the spleen is not fortified or mature until around six years of age, and the kidneys do not become exuberant until puberty. In addition, it is said in Chinese medicine that, “The spleen is the root of phlegm engenderment; the lungs are [merely] the place where phlegm is stored.” This helps explain why the lungs in children are so susceptible to the accumulation of phlegm dampness which hinders and obstructs the downward depuration of the lung qi. It is the inherent immaturity of the lungs, spleen, and kidneys which make enuresis mostly a pediatric complaint.

However, anything that damages and causes detriment to these three viscus can also cause formerly mature organs to become vacuous and insufficient. Things which can damage the lungs include excessive grief and sorrow and the chronic presence of evil qi, including wind evils, phlegm, and dampness. Signs and symptoms of lung qi vacuity include spontaneous perspiration, a weak voice, rapid breathing, and easy contraction of wind evils. Things which can damage the spleen include foods which engender excessive fluids, such as sweets, dairy products, and excessive oils and fat, and uncooked, chilled foods, as well as excessive fatigue, excessive worry and anxiety, excessive use of antibiotics, chronic respiratory and/or digestive diseases, and insufficient physical exercise. Signs and symptoms of spleen qi vacuity include fatigue, lack of strength, somnolence, lack of warmth in the hands and feet, torpid intake, loose stools, a fat tongue with teeth-marks on its edges, and a fine, forceless pulse. Things which can damage the kidneys include excessive fear and fright, excessive use of steroids, excessive use of anti-asthmatics, inappropriate use of antidepressants, premature sex, and artificial sweeteners. Signs and symptoms of kidney vacuity include frequent urination, nocturia, enuresis, low back and knees soreness
and limpness, the five softs, and the five slows, i.e., abnormally slow development. If there is kidney yang vacuity, then there will also be a pale tongue, a deep, slow pulse, and fear of cold. If there is kidney yin vacuity, there will also be a red facial complexion, hot hands and feet, and night sweats.

There are several types of repletions of evil qi which may also be involved in enuresis. We have mentioned liver channel damp heat above. However, there is more to say about the liver. According to Chinese medicine, the liver is inherently replete in infants and children. Repletions in the liver begin with liver depression qi stagnation. When the liver becomes depressed, it commonly counterflows to attack the spleen and stomach, especially if the spleen is vacuous and weak and unable to protect itself. What this means in clinical practice is that spleen vacuity is commonly complicated by liver depression. This is a mixed vacuity-repletion pattern. If the liver becomes depressed and the qi becomes stagnant, qi stagnation may transform into depressive heat. If this depressive heat joins with dampness, it may give rise to damp heat. However, because of the close association between the liver and the stomach, liver depression transforming heat may also give rise to depressive heat in the stomach. When the stomach becomes hot, it becomes hyperactive. One of the functions of the stomach is to send the turbid part of water and foods downward to the kidneys and bladder for excretion. If a hot stomach sends too many water fluids downward, this can cause or contribute to flooding-over of the bladder. And finally, because the spleen is the root of the engenderment and transformation of the defensive qi which is sent up to the lungs for distribution through the exterior, it is said that children easily contract external wind evils. Since the lungs govern the defensive exterior, these wind evils inhibit the diffusion and depuration of the lung qi which then inhibits the descent and depuration of water fluids. Thus wind evils lodged in the lungs can also play a part in enuresis.

Some mention also needs to be made of the heart and its role in enuresis. The heart spirit is nothing other than an accumulation of the heart qi nourished and enriched by blood and kidney essence. Further, this heart qi mainly comes from the clear qi upborne by the spleen. Therefore, because of inherent spleen vacuity in children, there tends to be an inherent heart qi and blood vacuity which is compounded by the inherent kidney vacuity we talked
about above. This is why it is said in Chinese medicine that children’s spirits are unstable and easily disquieted. When the spirit is quiet and tranquil, heart fire or yang moves downward to the kidneys to transform cold water. But, when the spirit is disquieted, it tends to stir frenetically and counterflow upward. Hence, heart fire and kidney water fail to interact, and this may also lead to the kidney qi failing to secure and astringe and control urination. In this case, kidney vacuity is the proximate cause of enuresis, but a disquieted heart spirit is a complicating or even causative factor.

Before moving on to the Chinese medical treatment of enuresis, I would also like to explain why deep sleep is such a common part of pediatric enuresis. Consciousness in Chinese medicine is a function of the clear yang qi. We wake when the clear yang qi is upborne to the heart which allows the spirit to flow freely to and through the sensory orifices to connect with the outside world. We go to sleep when this clear yang qi retreats and descends to the inner and lower parts of the body away from the heart. The clear yang qi is a by-product of water and foods transformed by the spleen and catalyzed by the kidneys, and we have seen that the spleen and kidneys are inherently vacuous and weak in children. In addition, when the yang qi arises to the heart, it must penetrate any phlegm, dampness, and turbidity before it can flow freely to and through the orifices, and infants and children typically have more phlegm, dampness, and turbidity than adults do. Thus the abnormal deep sleep of the pediatric enuresis patient is typically some combination of spleen-kidney vacuity complicated by phlegm, dampness, and turbidity.