

ACUPUNCTURE

ACUPUNCTURE: STICKING IT TO PAIN

National Health & Wellness Club

by John Rosengren

This ancient Chinese practice is fast gaining acceptance among aging patients and the mainstream western medical community.

Understand about Tim Clark: He's not a New Ager. You won't find crystals dangling from his rearview mirror nor Enya in his CD deck. The 49-year-old Minneapolis salesman is a traditional, show-me sort of guy. So when Clark's wife suggested he see an acupuncturist to treat his tennis elbow, he considered the idea hokey.

Even though acupuncture treatment had relieved his wife's diarrhea and abdominal pain caused by Crohn's disease, Clark wasn't about to pay somebody to poke him up like a voodoo doll. But the anti-inflammatory drugs and muscle relaxants his doctor had prescribed weren't working either. Wary of prescription medication's side effects, Clark decided to give acupuncture a try when his doctor suggested a different medication or surgery to relieve the persistent pain in his elbow.

After three sessions with a licensed acupuncturist, Clark could pick up a coffee cup and calculator without dropping them, and his skepticism started to wear thin. After five sessions, the pain in his elbow was gone, and he was sold. He asked the acupuncturist to treat the arthritis in his neck as well. The skeptic turned believer.

"When I first went in, I said 'ah, hokey,' thinking I was sure to keep peeling money off to give to her," Clark says. "After it worked, I said, 'Give me 15 of your business cards because I'm going to hand them out to the baby boomers I know who sit around complain about where it hurts and what doesn't work.'"

Gaining Acceptance

Clark is one of a rapidly growing number of patients extolling the benefits of acupuncture. Once seen as a fringe therapy, the ancient Chinese practice is fast gaining acceptance among the mainstream western medical community and third-party payers as legitimate treatment for a variety of ailments. Acupuncture's appeal is due to its

success in treating difficult conditions such as pain, headaches, nausea and addiction that conventional methods have failed to relieve. Although skepticism lingers and how acupuncture works remains a mystery, those who've found relief care only that acupuncture works.

Patient demographics have also played a significant role in acupuncture's increasing popularity. Aging baby boomers like Clark, whose bodies are no longer booming but starting to creak and ache, are seeking alternative therapies to prescription medications. Since acupuncture has proven an effective treatment for their primary symptom (i.e., pain), without harmful side effects, it has become the treatment of choice for many.

Acupuncture Philosophy

In a typical acupuncture treatment, several hair-thin needles are inserted at specific body points and twisted or otherwise manipulated to restore the balance of energy flowing through the body. Chinese theory holds that Qi (pronounced "chee"), the essential life force, flows through special pathways, or "meridians." When the pathways become obstructed, deficient or excessive, the universal forces of yin and yang are thrown out of balance, causing illness or pain. Stimulating various points along the meridians clears the blockage and returns the body to its natural state of health.

"The Chinese idea of medicine is different from ours," explains Beverly Shapiro, M.D., a trained acupuncturist who practices in her Philadelphia office. "Think of a tree. In western medicine, if we see problems with a branch, we cut it off or wrap it up. The Chinese see a problem with the branch and treat the root so that the tree will be healthy."

Acupressure works upon the same principles of treating specific points along the meridians, but it is a non-invasive treatment, using pressure with fingers or an instrument with a ball-shaped head, rather than needles, to stimulate the points. Moxibustion, another complementary form of acupuncture, applies heat to the points, often in conjunction with needles. It's commonly used to treat bronchial asthma, bronchitis and arthritic disorders.

Treatment Procedure

Acupuncture, which penetrates the points, is able to have a deeper impact than superficial treatments. The needles are inserted anywhere from 1/8 inch to 3 inches, depending on the practitioner's philosophy and the muscularity of the point - the more muscular, the deeper the insertion. Yet, needlephobics needn't worry about the pain. They might feel a sudden, sharp zing, but the sensation lasts less than a second, more like a quick prick to draw blood than the insertion of an IV needle.

Generally, acupuncture has no adverse side effects.

The practitioner manipulates the needles manually or attaches them to an electrostimulator that sends low frequencies. Treatments usually involve several visits spread out over weeks or months, the number varying with the symptoms being treated. Clark had four or five needles each inserted near his elbow, his gall bladder and his liver at depths ranging from 1/8 to 1/4 inch. His bursitis disappeared after five 90-minute visits and hasn't returned. When the chronic arthritis in his neck recurs, he returns for an electro-acupuncture treatment to ease the pain.

Acupuncture treatments aren't standardized but vary from patient to patient because some respond more quickly than others, while others might not respond at all. The farther along an ailment has progressed, the slower the patient will respond, yet experienced acupuncturists and physicians are at a loss to explain why identical treatments produce different results in different patients, other than to offer that the stronger a person's Qi, the more responsive they seem to be.

NIH Approval

Even so, a consensus panel convened by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) gave acupuncture a solid stamp of western approval in 1997 when it concluded that clear evidence demonstrates acupuncture is effective treatment for postoperative and chemotherapy nausea and vomiting, pregnancy nausea (morning sickness) and postoperative dental pain.

The NIH panel recommended additional research to prove what appeared to be effective treatment for addiction, stroke rehabilitation, headaches, menstrual cramps, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia (general muscle pain), low back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome and asthma.

But acupuncture is not a panacea for every pain. Shapiro steers patients toward conventional modern diagnosis and treatment for chest pain, persistent cough, blood in the stool or severe abdominal pain.

“I think everybody should have a regular medical doctor,” Shapiro says. “For anything acute and serious, people should seek both traditional and alternative medicine. For something not getting better in one system, try the other. There should be a merging of the two.”

Practitioner Training

More and more medical doctors are arriving at a similar perspective. According to the World Health Organization, more than 3,000 physicians practice acupuncture. While only nine states actually require medical doctors to have specific training to practice acupuncture, Shapiro, like many of her colleagues, received special training at UCLA, one of the nation’s best known centers for training physicians in acupuncture.

In such a program, physicians receive between 200 and 300 hours of training, while a licensed acupuncturist undergoes approximately 2,500 hours of study. The additional hours encompass a broader view of Oriental medicine as well as specific anatomical study for those with at least a two-year undergraduate degree. Whether one is better off in the hands of a medical doctor with acupuncture training or a licensed acupuncturist is a question answered differently from either side of the fence.

“Doctors need less training because they’ve gone through six years of medical school,” says C. James Dowden, executive administrator of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture, which sets standards for its 2,000-plus practicing members. “Their ability to assess and respond to patients is born out of their medical training.”

“There are some people who will always prefer a medical doctor as their healthcare provider,” acknowledges Barbara Mitchell, J.D., L.Ac., executive director of the Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance, a professional membership organization for licensed acupuncturists.

“Others want to go to individuals whose area of specialization is in acupuncture and Oriental medicine. We (licensed acupuncturists) are the ones who have years of training and expertise.”

Regulation

Most states have established standards regulating the practice of acupuncture - be it by physicians or licensed acupuncturists - based on education and competency criteria set forth by the World Federation of Acupuncture Societies. In nine states (Alabama, Delaware, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma and Wyoming), acupuncture remains unregulated. While acupuncture is tolerated in those nine states, its practice is technically illegal.

Acupuncture's sometime outlaw status notwithstanding, it continues to gain significant national acceptance as a legitimate medical practice. In addition to the NIH panel endorsement, acupuncture's acceptance made a great stride forward when the Food and Drug Administration reclassified the status of needles in the mid-90s, no longer deeming them surgical instruments. Several recent articles published in respected medical journals have reported the results of studies confirming the efficacy of acupuncture treatments, such as one published last December in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) that showed measurable benefits in women nauseated from chemotherapy.

Mysterious but Effective

Despite its growing acceptance, acupuncture remains a mystery. No one, not even the Chinese who have been practicing it for nearly 5,000 years, knows how acupuncture works. Various theories abound, the most commonly held being the gate control theory, which postulates that acupuncture overwhelms and shuts down gateways that send pain impulses to the brain. The theory fails to explain, however, why the effects of acupuncture can last months after a treatment.

The uncertainty troubles the scientifically determined, those who want definitive evidence and are uncomfortable in the company of Qi. Most skeptics write off acupuncture as a placebo, saying its success is psychosomatic. Yet the study reported in the December JAMA article used a control group that received phony acupuncture treatments that reduced vomiting less than legitimate treatments, concluding that acupuncture produced physiological results.

Still, you can't convince all of the people all of the time. "There's a clash of cultures," Dowden says. "The difference between a system of

medicine that prides itself based on scientific evidence that can be duplicated time after time and a system that comes out of folklore where the science that backs it up doesn't meet the standards we would impose on Pfizer when it introduces a new drug.”

Ultimately, the patient has to decide. For Clark, who's sliding into the ailments of middle age, discovering acupuncture's benefits may ease the pain of aging. “It has opened up my head to other forms of nontraditional medicine,” he says.

John Rosengren is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer who's no longer afraid of needles. He frequently writes about health and fitness for a variety of publications, including Minnesota Sports, Sports Illustrated for Women, and Twin Cities Sports.

What Does Acupuncture Treat?

A growing body of evidence suggests that acupuncture works to alleviate:

nausea, vomiting and loss of appetite brought on by common cancer treatments of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, hormone therapy and immunotherapy

postoperative dental pain

morning sickness of pregnancy

cravings of drug addiction

headaches

menstrual cramps

tennis elbow

fibromyalgia

low back pain

general muscle pain

carpal tunnel syndrome

asthma

What's it Cost and Who's Going to Pay?

A single acupuncture treatment costs anywhere from \$40 to \$100, depending upon the practitioner and your place of residence. According to the NIH, about 70 to 80 percent of insurers cover at least part of that cost. Four states (Montana, Nevada, Washington and West Virginia) mandate that insurance companies reimburse treatment by licensed

acupuncturists. Another four (California, Florida, Maine and Oregon) stipulate that if companies reimburse for acupuncture treatments provided by a medical doctor, they must also do so for treatments by licensed acupuncturists.

You'll need to check your own policy to learn whether your insurer covers acupuncture treatment. Clark's didn't. He had to pay out of pocket, but figured the relief he gained was worth each \$50 session.

Finding an Acupuncturist

You wouldn't pick a psychotherapist from the yellow pages; similar care should be taken in choosing an acupuncturist. Perhaps you have a friend, family member or colleague who has had a positive experience with acupuncture and can recommend a practitioner. You can also consult your physical therapist, chiropractor or medical doctor for a referral. Or you can contact the Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance referral service: (253) 851-6896 or www.acupuncturealliance.org.

Whether you decide to see a licensed acupuncturist or a physician with acupuncture training, be sure that the practitioner meets your state's training and certification requirements. If he or she is a medical doctor, check that he or she has had specific training in acupuncture.

You can glean this information from the practitioner's staff if not from the practitioner directly. You can also ask how long the person has been practicing acupuncture, for what sort of ailments and the level of success patients have reported.

Most acupuncturists these days use only disposable needles. But to avoid the spread of infectious diseases, check to be sure.

Finally, as with any healthcare provider, look for someone who will listen to what you want treated. The better they listen, the better they will be able to treat you.