

# Integrate acupuncture into your practice?

Some of your patients are turning to alternative therapies—be it for pain management or smoking cessation. A family physician who uses acupuncture looks at what it is, when it's indicated, how to get training.

## What is acupuncture?

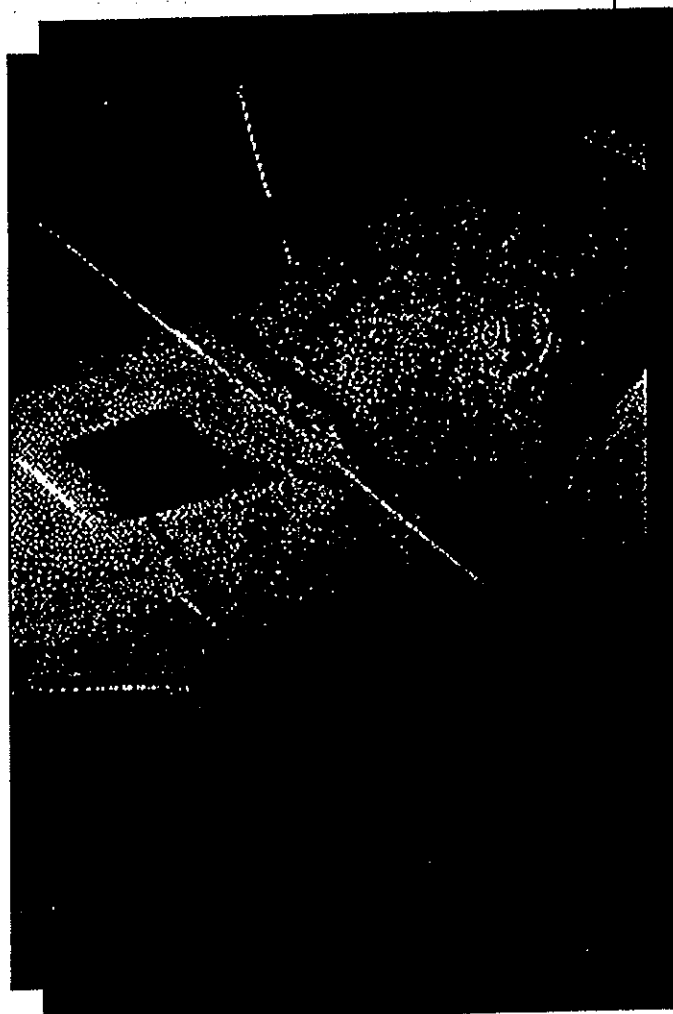
Acupuncture is the insertion of fine needles through the skin at meridian points in the body. The needles are of different lengths and diameters, depending on the area of the body that is pierced. They are left undisturbed for usually 20-30 minutes. Meridians, which are the "pathways of energy," are located in 12 paired sets on either side of the midline of the body's dorsal and ventral surfaces, and each meridian relates symbolically to a different body function and organ. It is believed that the human body is governed by 26 lines of meridians, which carry the "chi" energy, or the vital life force.

Along these lines are situated about 800 points where the meridians come to the body surfaces. It is on these points that therapeutic procedures are performed and diagnostic clues are obtained.

## When was it first used?

Acupuncture was first recorded by Huang Di Nei Jing in *The Emperor's Canon of Internal Medicine*, compiled more than 2,000 years ago (475-221 BC). However, there were earlier practices dating back 4,000-10,000 years in

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primitive societies that used massaging stones over certain points of the body. Moxibustion (the warming of acupuncture points usually by the herb mugwort) has also been traced historically back to societies that warmed areas of the body for therapeutic affects.

Understanding classical acupuncture theory with the law of five elements, the philosophy of Yin and Yang, pulse diagnosis, and examination of the tongue is quite complicated and requires years of study. Quite simply, it might be explained that when there is an imbalance or blockage of life energy, the body can then become distressed or diseased. This action of insertion of the needles is thought to re-establish the balanced flow of energy in the body, either by stimulating or suppressing the energy.

This technique has been used to treat a variety of diseases, relieve pain, and produce an anaesthetic effect for surgical procedures. Shiatsu, which is finger pressure applied to the acupuncture points, moxibustion, and transcutaneous nerve stimulation all use the same acupuncture points.

Virtually all acupuncture points correspond to known neural structures, and it is possible to detect acupoints electrically with an instrument which measures skin resistance.<sup>1,2</sup> Most acupuncture points supply a lower skin resistance than the surrounding skin, and the location is constant in all people.

Simple dry needling of tender points can give relief to different kinds of problems. Some of these tender points correlate with trigger points that have been described in other conditions, such as fibrositis.<sup>3</sup>

#### What is the scientific explanation?

Most of the scientific explanations focus on three major areas.

It has been shown that acupuncture analgesia was blocked by naloxone, implying that acupuncture analgesia is produced by stimu-

lation of the body's endogenous opiates or endorphins. It is believed that low-frequency (2-6 Hertz) electrical acupuncture stimulates receptors and muscles, resulting in the release of endorphins in the spinal chord, midbrain, hypothalamus, and pituitary glands, which help in pain mediation.<sup>4</sup>

It has also been demonstrated that electroacupuncture increases blood cortisol levels in horses and human beings.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, another possible mechanism is that acupuncture stimulates serotonin, GABA, and acetylcholine which act as neurotransmitters which mediate pain response.<sup>6</sup>

#### What are the clinical indications?

There are many studies in the scientific literature that demonstrate the usefulness of acupuncture.<sup>7-11</sup>

Acupuncture seems most helpful in treating pain syndromes (dysmenorrhea, headaches, coccydynia, plantar fasciitis) and single-joint pain (knee, shoulder, elbow, or small joints of the hands and feet). It is also useful in the treatment of systemic problems such as functional constipation, allergies, acute sinusitis, and smoking cessation. In such countries as China and Sri Lanka, acupuncture is used as anesthesia during surgery.

If a patient presents with a swollen, painful joint, then acupuncture can be useful—rather than putting him on a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug that has systemic side effects, or injecting that joint with cortisone, which also carries some risks. Sometimes even chronic joint pain can be relieved in 5-6 sessions. Tennis elbow, tendonitis of the shoulder, trigger finger, and TMJ dysfunction also respond well to acupuncture. Chronic back, neck, and other similar pain syndromes are more difficult and need an experienced clinician.

When treating isolated musculoskeletal problems, it is important to correct the underlying cause of the problem, or the disability

may return. For example, the treatment of headaches often requires the treatment of dietary, structural, and emotional aspects of the patient, as well as putting in the needles.

For smoking cessation, acupuncture needles are put in the ears and stimulated with electricity for 20 minutes, 1-2 times a week for the first few weeks. Press needles can remain in the ears between office treatments. Acupuncture seems to help most with the withdrawal side effects and can be used in addition to transdermal patches or any other technique.

#### Are there any side effects?

In the 15 years I have done acupuncture, four patients have had syncopal attacks, because they were sitting up rather than lying down during the treatment. Two cases of asthma were aggravated at the time of the acupuncture treatment.

Many conditions that seem to get worse after the acupuncture treatment, very often in the long run get better after the initial aggravation. Occasionally mild pain, minimal bleeding, or bruising can result at needle insertion points.

I have had no incidence of infection or any other serious complication. Since there is a concern regarding infections, especially AIDS and hepatitis B, autoclaving or sterilizing the needles at high temperatures for considerable lengths of time is important. Most practitioners use disposable needles and some use expensive electrical and laser acupuncture, thus avoiding needles. Certain acupuncture points are contraindicated in pregnant women, because acupuncture has been reported to cause miscarriages.

Also, specific acupuncture points are dangerous if needled improperly, so proper training and knowing one's limits is crucial.

#### Is there a formal training program?

Most countries have acupuncture organizations run by MDs that offer training courses

for MDs.

The Acupuncture Foundation of Canada Institute runs practical courses for physicians, dentists, and physiotherapists. Rather than teaching the complicated Traditional Chinese Medicine system, an anatomical Western approach is used. Doctors learn the most important points and practice inserting needles at the workshop. Courses are offered at different levels, covering various parts of the body and common diseases that primary care physicians treat.

The three-day introductory course covers the basic concepts of anatomical and classical acupuncture and TENS. The workshops are offered across Canada, and a schedule can be obtained by calling (416) 752-3988, or by writing Acupuncture Foundation of Canada Institute, P.O. Box 93688, Shopper's World Postal Outlet, 3003 Danforth Ave., Toronto, M4C 5R5.

In the future, it is speculated that physicians will be using acupuncture as a treatment of first choice in some conditions, rather than a last desperate attempt to help the patient when all else has failed.<sup>12</sup>

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