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The Power of a Pinprick

First discovered in China during the reign of Huang Di, "The Yellow Emperor's", acupuncture is a form of alternative medicine that involves stimulating certain points, referred to as acupoints, on a human body to relieve pain and promote healing and overall wellbeing. Rebecca Walker interviews Chinese Medical Practitioner, Troy Sing, about the benefits of this ancient therapy.

While conventional health care is still thought of by many to be the primary option for treating an illness, alternative therapies such as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) are fast gaining acceptance and popularity in both the Eastern and Western parts of the world. Based on a vitalistic approach to the body and its physiology, TCM is based on the concept that each individual is part of a universal energy system and that health is achieved by keeping the body in a 'balanced state'.

TCM treats the person, not the disease; the cause, not the symptom. "The central principle of Chinese medical thought is that the whole body should be kept in harmony," explains Troy Sing, Chinese Medicine Practitioner and Chief Acupuncturist at the Health-Wise Chinese Medicine Consultancy. "This means that each organ of the body must not only perform well, but must also keep in balance with the rest. When one organ is not functioning as it should, it will affect the overall performance of the others. TCM seeks to restore the body to a condition of balance."

Influenced by Taoist philosophy which purports that everything is an amalgam of opposites and is made up of equal measures of yin and yang, TCM is an holistic system that seeks to create equilibrium. Yin is comprised of all things dark, negative and feminine whereas Yang is all things light, positive and masculine. One cannot exist without the other. However, one may overpower the other and create an imbalance. TCM practitioners believe that if the yin and yang are not balanced within a person, he or she will be more prone to illness or disease. "All forms of Oriental medicine rely on a 'system of correspondence': life arises from the endless interplay of polar forces of yin and yang, heaven and earth, active and passive, contracting and relaxing," explains Sing. "Everything can be classified in terms of yin and yang; everything contains aspects of both in unique and constantly changing proportions."

As well as having balanced yin and yang, a person should be concerned with having balanced 'Qi' (life energy). According to TCM, Qi (or Chi; both pronounced 'chee') is the invisible energy that flows through every living thing. It is believed that a balanced flow of this energy is key

to a person's overall health. If the flow is interrupted at any point, some parts of the body will be affected and as a result, will not function optimally and which then may lead to illness or disease. In order to restore health, the Qi must be rebalanced. The practice of acupuncture works to rebalance the flow of Qi and thus allow the body to naturally heal itself. "Disease is caused by imbalance between Qi, blood, yin substances and yang function, as well as organ pathologies, infections, and emotional factors," explains Sing. "Each disease is classified as a pattern of disharmony. Treatment aims to restore harmonious balance by controlling and regulating the flow and balance of circulation."

Just as Western medical doctors monitor blood flowing through blood vessels and messages travelling via the nervous system, acupuncturists assess the flow and distribution of Qi within pathways known as 'meridians' and 'acupoints' and help restore the body's yin and yang balance. Meridians are comparable to the nervous system. There are 12 principal bilateral meridians on each side of the body and each has a network of main trunks and minor branches which are intimately connected with the body's organs.

Put simply, each meridian is connected to a particular organ, and the energy flowing through that meridian can be taken as an indication of the functional state of that organ. For example in TCM a backache is viewed as a blockage in the Qi circulating in the bladder meridian. "The importance of the longitudinal meridian system (Jing-luo) is unique to TCM," says Sing. "By stimulating Qi and blood flow to and from areas around the body (through pressure, heat, vacuum and point puncture) distal points can be stimulated to affect an organ's function or modulate a pain pathway thereby promoting healing."

The body's 'acupoints' were originally mapped out by ancient Chinese practitioners and are associated with specific internal organ systems. There are more than 1000 acupoints in the body and by measuring the electrical charge at these points, researchers have found that they have more nerve endings than other areas of the skin. If you are suffering from nausea, for example, needles might be inserted into acupoints on the wrist, while a vision problem might be treated with needles in the foot.

Typically on your first visit to an acupuncturist, the practitioner will take a thorough medical history, examine the patient's tongue and take the pulse on each wrist. According to Chinese medicine, the tongue is the mirror of the body and harmony and disharmony will be reflected in its colour, moisture, size, coating and the location of abnormalities. These signs reveal not only overall states of health but correlate to specific organ functions and disharmonies, especially in the digestive system. For example, white 'fur' on the tongue suggests an excess of heat in the stomach. The way a tongue appears is not an absolute indicator of the location of the disharmony, but when taken as part of an overall analysis, it offers strong



clues to the location of disharmony.

Pulses are evaluated on both a superficial and deep level. Disharmonies of the pulses indicate: the condition of Qi (energy), Xue (blood), fluids and organ system imbalances; the location of the imbalance; and the nature (heat or cold) of the disease, along with many other qualities. The most common descriptions are: 'floating', 'slippery', 'choppy', 'wiry', 'tight', 'slow', 'rapid', 'thin', 'big', 'empty' and 'full'. For example, a wiry pulse may indicate that the liver has stagnant Qi. Although pulses contribute to a diagnosis, their meanings are not absolute.

Acupuncture needles are very long and thin (about the size of three strands of human hair) and are designed to enter the skin with little resistance. Their insertion should be almost painless, although there is often a mild pinprick and a tingling sensation as the needle makes contact with the Qi within the tissue.

Although the needles can feel slightly uncomfortable at times, they rarely cause pain. Once they are inserted, the acupuncturist may gently twist them manually or send a weak electrical current through them to increase the energy flow. As Sing purports, "The inclusion of electro-acupuncture has become a hallmark of modern acupuncture because it seems to improve clinical outcomes, however some practitioners and clients still prefer the traditional hand twirling of the needles."

The needles may be left in for 15 to 40 minutes, depending on the ailment. Some practitioners also use moxibustion, which involves burning herbs (primarily the dried herb mugwort), near acupoints, to speed up healing. "The word 'moxa' is derived from a Dutch translation of the Japanese words 'moxgusa,' which basically means 'to burn a herb'. The use of the moxi plant (*Artemisia Vulgaris*) as the principal substance of combustion dates from the late Chou period," says Sing. Doing moxa regularly on specific acupuncture points is said to promote strength and longevity. In fact, according to an old Chinese saying, "Never take a long journey with a person who does not have a moxa scar on 'Zu San Li' (the acupuncture point called Stomach 36)."

Different people experience different sensations from acupuncture. Some describe a tingling pins-and-needles feeling, others may feel numbness or nothing at all. Most find the sessions relaxing, and many fall asleep during or immediately after treatment. "Acupuncture is a form of physical stimulation to the skin and muscles and its aim is to promote the circulation of blood and nutrients to an area," says Sing. "It can be likened to massage as it can identify areas of knotted tissue and whilst these can be uncomfortable to palpation, they can also relax faster with the right type of stimulation. The object is to improve the functioning of the area and many find themselves able to feel relaxed a sense of well-being as the circulation improves."

In general, visits should occur once or twice a week over several months until therapeutic results are achieved. Some patients notice rapid improvement after just a few sessions, however in those whose conditions have taken years to develop, treatment may take longer. Since acupuncture is a complete medical system unto itself (not another branch of modern Western medicine) preclinical studies cannot fully explain its effects within the framework of the Western system. Ultimately acupuncture is no 'quick-fix' solution and its effects may take time, but when applied in accordance with the unique Oriental principles and philosophies from which it evolved it does work.

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Acupuncture Do's and Don't's

- Choose a therapist who is licensed and/or a graduate of a respected school of acupuncture.
- Get a diagnosis from a medical doctor before undergoing acupuncture to make sure you don't have a condition requiring prompt medical attention.
- Don't cease any medication you may be on without consulting your doctor. Acupuncture works with, not in place of, conventional medicine.
- Tell the acupuncturist about all health conditions, including pregnancy, and list all medications (including herbs and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs that could cause you to bleed).
- Be sure the acupuncturist uses sterilised or disposable needles.
- Don't take muscle relaxants, tranquilisers or painkillers right before acupuncture, as acupuncture may intensify the effects of these drugs.
- Tell the practitioner right away if you experience pain or bleeding. Acupuncture shouldn't hurt after the initial sting of the needle's insertion; you should not bleed more than a few drops.
- Don't automatically take herbs offered by traditional Chinese practitioners. They could interact with prescription drugs.
- Keep notes about your response to the treatment, and tell your doctor and acupuncturist about any changes.
- Track your progress. If you have no response at all after four to six sessions, this therapy may not work for you.

