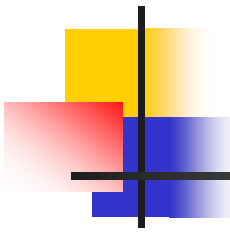




Getting the point – Debating Acupuncture in General Practice

Dr John Bourke



Why would a semi sane GP like you use acupuncture?

- Medicine doesn't have all the answers
- 1.7 billion Chinese can't be wrong...
- It works
- It's safe
- It integrates easily into General Practice
- It is cost effective
- It enhances clinical skills
- So, the real question is: Why not?

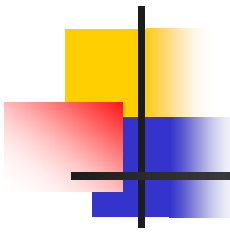


So give us a few reasons, then

- The dream therapy...
- Uses the body's own neurophysiology
- Is without serious side effects
- Is effective
- Is predictable in its effects
- Has lasting effects
- Is highly cost effective
- Acupuncture comes very close to most of the above criteria

But it's all mystical waffle, isn't it?

- The ancient Chinese model is that life and health depend on an all pervasive energy called "Qi"
- Qi problems (lack, excess, faulty circulation of qi) = disease
- No Qi = Death
- Essential aspects of qi include Yin/Yang theory, Zang Fu organs, interaction of the organism with the Tao (universe)
- Thankfully, it's a model!
- Basic way to explain qi in modern terms is to equate it to standard physiological functions, e.g Wei Qi (defensive qi) is the equivalent of the immune system, Pi (main digestive and blood control organ) is roughly equivalent to spleen/portal venous system and RE system
- At the end, it is a simple descriptive model
- Fei Yin Xu, described approx 2,000 years ago, has these symptoms: Cough, productive of scanty blood stained sputum, afternoon fever, "5 palm heat", sweating, weight loss and lassitude
- In other words: Pulmonary TB!



Anyway, how can any Doctor use this without major mental conflict?

- Actually, there isn't any!
- The Chinese recognised the importance of hygiene, healthy diet, good living and quality housing millennia ago
- Environmental factors and weaknesses in the individual combine to produce disease
- Which explains why we all get different illnesses, and die of different causes at different ages



So, how can a few needles do anything?

- The most fundamental “Qi” is the nervous system, especially the Neurotransmitters
- Alter the NT levels, and you alter the organism
- Which is, after all, how most drugs work!
- Insertion of a needle into the body causes localised trauma, inflammatory response, and instant communication with the CNS (acupuncture is least effective in denervated tissue or in patients on steroids)
- Some papers have been published outlining inexplicable Brain and neurotransmitter responses to acupuncture stimulation



All very interesting, but is it any use?

- Evidence base in western medicine is:
 1. Drug based
 2. Drug funded
 3. Based largely on Double Blind or meta analysis
 4. Costs a fortune
- Very hard to double blind a needle – who knows where it would end up!
- In fact, there are several studies, and most negatives simply refer to study design or numbers, and suggest further research
- Disadvantage to many negative studies is that they don't use the TCM model for point selection, so outcomes inevitably very variable
- Convincing evidence exists in pain, including headache, nausea, pregnancy problems, and lots of musculo- skeletal problems
- In theory, acupuncture can treat anything, but we have made some progress in 2,500 years, so “horses for courses” is my maxim



Come on, give us some stats:

- Safety: BMJ 7311 1 Sept 2001 pp 485, 486: 2 studies published on (a) 32,000 consultations by doctors, physios, other practitioners reported "no serious events and 671 minor events (pain, bruising) per 10,000 treatments and (b) on 34,000 consultations to members of British Acupuncture Council found "underlying serious adverse event rate of 0 -1.1 per 10,000 treatments, with no fatalities"
- National Centre for Health Statistics USA reported in same year "16,000 fatalities from 13 million NSAID Rx, or 1.23 deaths per 10,000 prescriptions" Minor or serious adverse effects not reported - Equivalent death rate for AIDS and acute leukaemias
- NSAIDs have no licence for treatment of low back pain
- Any safe alternative must have a place in practice
- Acupuncture offers just such an alternative – another tool in the box for a clinician.



But what about the cost?

- BMA report on acupuncture BMJ 1999; 319 pp 973-976 " In the light of the evidence supporting the use of acupuncture for back pain, dental pain, migraine, nausea and vomiting in appropriate patients, consideration should be given to having this treatment available on the NHS"
- NIH Consensus Report on Acupuncture 1998 JAMA 280, pp. 1518-24 " Cost effective and promising results in nausea and vomiting, addiction, dental pain, stroke, arthritis and myofascial pain"



OK, how is it used?

- Consider acupuncture in management of a wide range of common conditions presenting in practice.
- Generally most useful in chronic conditions, apart from acute musculo-skeletal conditions
- Initial course of 6 sessions in about 2 weeks, then at lengthening intervals according to response
- About 20% of patients have no useful acupuncture response
- Impossible to predict these in advance, so every patient is a trial
- Try to avoid initiating other therapies until after the first 6 sessions



What do you need?

- Highly cost effective from practitioner point of view
- Needles approx €5 per 100
- Electrostimulator €250 -400
- Couch, separate rooms necessary
- Various levels of training available, though none obligatory.
- However, results reflect degree of training
- WHO recommendation is 200 hours training in TCM