

Fact Sheet on Acupuncture

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese medical procedure involving insertion and manipulation of needles at more than 360 points in the human body. Applied to relieve pain during surgery or in rheumatic conditions, and to treat many other illnesses, acupuncture is used today in most hospitals in China and by some private practitioners in Japan, Europe, and the United States.

Acupressure, a variant in which the practitioner uses manipulation rather than penetration to alleviate pain or other symptoms, is in widespread use in Japan and has begun to find adherents in the United States and elsewhere. Also known as *shiatsu*, acupressure is administered by pressing with the fingertips—and sometimes the elbows or knees—along a complex network of trigger points in the patient's body.

In traditional Chinese medicine, it is believed an energy called chi flows along invisible energy channels called 'meridians' which are believed to be linked to internal organs. Sticking needles at particular points along those meridians is believed to increase or decrease that flow of energy.

Chinese traditional medicine sees that a balance has to be kept between two opposing yet complementary natural forces called 'yin' (female) and 'yang' (male). Yin force is seen as being passive, tranquil, and represents darkness, coldness, moisture and swelling. Yang force is seen as being aggressive and stimulating, and represents light, heat, dryness and contraction.

History

Acupuncture needles dating from 4,000 years ago have been found in China. The first needles were made of stone; later, bronze, gold, or silver were used, and, today, needles are usually made of steel. Initially, needles were used only to prick boils and ulcers. Acupuncture was developed in response to the theory that there are special "meridian points" on the body connected to the internal organs, and that "vital energy" flows along the meridian lines. According to this theory, diseases are caused by interrupted energy flow, and inserting and twirling needles restores normal flow.

Treatment

The primary use of acupuncture in China today is for surgical *analgesia* (pain relief). Chinese surgeons estimate that 30 per cent of surgical patients obtain adequate analgesia with acupuncture, which is now done by sending an electrical current through the needles rather than by twirling them. American doctors who have observed surgery done under acupuncture have verified that it is effective in some patients, but put the figure closer to 10 per cent.

Brain surgery is especially amenable to this form of analgesia. Chinese surgeons claim that acupuncture is superior to Western, drug-induced analgesia in that it does not disturb normal body physiology, and, therefore, does not make the patient vulnerable to *shock* (acute fall in blood pressure).

Chinese doctors also treat some forms of heart disease with acupuncture. As part of an attempt to put the practice on a more scientific basis, they studied the effects of acupuncture treatment on more than 600 people with chest pain caused by reduced blood flow to the heart. They claimed that almost all the patients greatly reduced their use of medicine, and that most were able to resume work. Other physiological conditions treated with acupuncture are peptic ulcers, *hypertension* (high blood pressure), appendicitis, and asthma.

In 1979, the World Health Organisation listed some 40 diseases that could be successfully treated with acupuncture, including breathing difficulties, digestive problems, disorders of the nervous system and painful menstruation