

NIH Panel Gets The Point: Acupuncture Works

By Frank Gemmato, LAc

A National Institutes of Health panel convened last month in Washington, D.C. to assess the effectiveness of acupuncture in the treatment of a variety of diseases. The panel, comprised of scientific experts spent three days analyzing studies and interrogating practitioners. At the conclusion of the conference, Chairman David Ramsay, president of the University of Maryland, said, "It's time to take acupuncture seriously. There are a number of situations where it really does work."

Treatable Diseases

The panel found acupuncture to be effective in treating a wide range of disorders affecting the muscle and skeletal systems such as fibromyalgia and tennis elbow. In some of these cases it was judged to be even more effective than conventional treatment with drugs and surgery. It was also considered a reasonable option for low back pain, menstrual cramps, and the relief of postoperative pain. And it won a qualified endorsement as a supplemental treatment for the symptoms drug withdrawal, carpal tunnel syndrome, osteoarthritis and asthma.

Also deemed highly responsive to acupuncture were morning sickness during pregnancy, postoperative pain from dental surgery, and nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy and anesthesia.

No Side Effects

Unlike Western medicine's key treatment modalities, drugs and surgery, acupuncture has virtually no side effects. In 17 years of practice I have noted many positive side benefits. Because acupuncture treats the whole person, it is common for symptoms that are not being treated directly to improve. For example one arthritis patient's chronic dizziness improved after treatment for joint pain.

How It Works

Scientists know that acupuncture produces measurable changes in the brain. Dr. Abass Alavi, chief of nuclear medicine at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia, presented a series of brain scans that showed dramatic changes in the regions of the central nervous system that coordinate the perception of pain. "Acupuncture definitely changed the landscape of pain that we see in the brain," Alavi said.

Acupuncture has been shown to stimulate the release of endorphins, the body's own natural opiate-like substances. It also is a powerful regulator of neurotransmitters like serotonin and norepinephrine. These factors account for acupuncture's relaxing and pain relieving effects, as well as its ability to relieve moderate depression and control cravings for food and drugs.

Economic Impact

About a million Americans spend \$500 million annually on acupuncture performed by about 10,000 licensed practitioners. Studies suggest that it is less expensive and less painful than conventional treatments. One researcher told the panel that the savings from treating carpal-tunnel-syndrome and faster stroke rehabilitation alone could cut the nation's annual medical bill by \$11 billion. Statistics like this are undoubtedly catching the attention of HMOs and private health insurers.

The NIH panel's conclusion that acupuncture works is a major step toward incorporation into the mainstream of medical care in America.

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