

Treatment grows in popularity

UCH ACUPUNCTURIST HELPS PATIENTS PAST TREATMENT'S STICKING POINTS

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Wong, an acupuncturist with The Center for Integrative Medicine, finds common ground in Eastern and Western treatment modalities.

Ban Wong fires up a video on his computer, then sits back while his visitor watches something remarkable unfold on the screen.

The clip from 2007 shows a young female patient in Shanghai, China, undergoing open heart surgery – without conventional anesthesia. The patient’s face remains calm, however, as the operation proceeds. Instead of intravenous medications, her caregiver is using acupuncture to prevent her from feeling pain.

It’s not likely the scene will be repeated in the U.S. yet, concedes Wong, an acu-

puncturist with The Center for Integrative Medicine (TCFIM) at University of Colorado Hospital. But the ancient technique is widely acknowledged in the West as an effective treatment for a variety of ailments, most notably chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting (*Insider*, April 8, 2008), and pain relief for everything from toothaches to post-surgical incisions to severe headaches (*see related story, this issue*).

Growing acceptance. The public’s willingness to accept – and seek out – acupuncture as an alternative to traditional Western methods of pain relief and stress management seems to be growing. Wong sees about a dozen patients a day, three days a week, and the practice is set to hire two more acupuncturists on a contract basis to accommodate the additional demand, says Ben Meyerhoff, the center’s practice manager.

“We average about 200 patient encounters a month” for acupuncture services, Meyerhoff notes. “It’s easily the busiest of all the services we offer,” which include massage therapy, chiropractic, biofeedback and more. It is busy, moreover, despite the fact that patients must almost

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always pay for acupuncture and other TCFIM services out of pocket.

Wong says TCFIM gets its acupuncture patient referrals from a widening variety of hospital sources, including the Oncology, Neurology and Women’s Integrated Services in Health practices and the Center for Dependency, Addiction and Rehabilitation.



“We also see patients seeking relief of post-surgical pain, and we get cross-referrals from other services within TCFIM. Acupuncture is just one more tool to treat patients,” he says. “It’s like ketchup. It seems to complement many other treatments.”

While acupuncture may still seem exotic and mysterious to some, it’s found growing acceptance in the Western medical community, Wong notes. California, for example, recognized licensed acupuncturists as primary health care professionals as long ago as 1979. A panel of experts convened in 1997 by the National Institutes of Health concluded there was “sufficient evidence of acupuncture’s value to expand its use into conventional medicine.”

Expand it has. The World Health Organization now recommends acupuncture

for treatment of some 40 gastrointestinal, neurologic, respiratory and other conditions. It’s been used to treat children and even animals. Prestigious academic medical centers, including Harvard Medical School, Duke University Medical Center and UCLA Medical Center, offer courses and training in acupuncture and continue to research its effectiveness.

Energy pathways. The theory of acupuncture is the body is composed of “meridians,” or channels, through which flows Qi (pronounced “chee”), the fundamental energy or life force that sustains us. Pain, disease, injury, stress and other factors may either block the meridians or be the result of blocked meridians. In either case, the blockages create imbalances in the body’s energy flow. The acupuncturist finds the blocked points and applies needles to stimulate and unblock them to restore Qi’s natural flow.

Traditional Chinese Medicine, of which acupuncture is only one part, also incorporates herbal therapy and moxibustion, a technique – not used at TCFIM – that involves stimulating blocked points with heat produced by igniting certain materials near the skin.

“Traditional Chinese Medicine is a type of holistic medicine that has complete systems of theory and practice,” says Wong. “Health maintenance and illness prevention are well emphasized in its tradition.”

The approach, he explains, also includes acupressure, traditional exercise techniques called qigong, diet and lifestyle modification in “tailored” individual treatments to achieve “synergistic” effects.

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Common ground. Western medicine, with its emphasis on empirical evidence, and Chinese medicine take different approaches to healing, Wong acknowledges, but they are not mutually exclusive.

“Western medicine has a lot to offer such as vaccines, surgery, urgent care, scanning technology, antibiotics, drugs therapy, chemotherapy and radiation therapy,” he says.

“In comparison, Chinese medicine can offer a lot of assistance in pain and disease management.”

East and West can meet, he believes, and find common ground. “If they can reconcile their differences, instead of using one hand to take care of a patient, two hands are always better,” he says. “The thinking between East and West is really not very different. Both try to do no harm; both try to do good for the patient.”

Want to learn more about acupuncture? View the British Broadcasting Corporation’s 2007 series at <http://www.open2.net/alternativemedicine/programme1.html>.

More Acceptance, but Misconceptions Still Abound

Acupuncture may be finding a growing number of adherents in the West, but it still suffers from some misconceptions, Ban Wong says.

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The first stumbling block for many people, of course, are the needles, but Wong says patients who decide to get acupuncture treatment quickly find there is very

little pain involved. Bigger barriers often come from people’s sometimes unrealistic expectations of acupuncture, he notes.

“People think that one or two treatments should work to relieve pain,” he remarks, “but they don’t realize if they’ve been inflicted with an illness for 10 or more years, it’s going to take time. Our society wants instant gratification. Acupuncture isn’t like medicine. It works on the natural healing systems of the body. It’s not so simple to change everything.”

Patience, please. Simply put, acupuncture treatments require some patience, he states. “People with chronic and degenerative conditions will need to take time

to respond,” Wong says. “Water doesn’t boil the moment you turn on the fire; one needs to leave the fire on for some time.”

Because acupuncture works on the body’s energy, “it should always have some effect,” Wong says. But that doesn’t mean everyone will respond to treatment the same way, he adds.

“The sensitivity of people to different types of treatments varies,” he notes. Long periods of illness, reliance on medications, chemicals, stress, pollution and other factors, he explains, can “interfere with the body’s normal physiology.”

Some skeptics still believe that the relief acupuncture provides simply results from a “placebo effect,” Wong concedes. “Hard-core science is showing otherwise,” he responds. “We now have many medical acupuncture programs. Physicians are now trained in it and are using it.”

For example, he says some research shows that signals induced by acupuncture can start the flow of pain-killing biochemicals, such as endorphins. “Functional magnetic resonance imaging studies show the deactivation of pain receptors in the brain during acupuncture,” he adds.

