

## Acupuncture gets to the point in healing

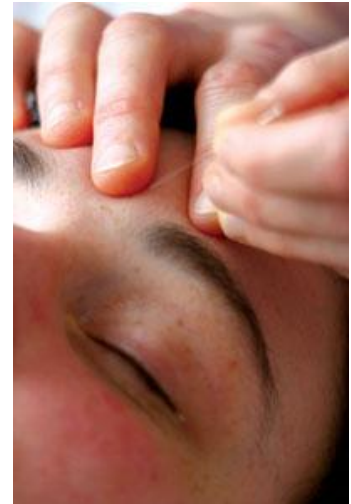
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Samantha Berg is touching my ears. I do not like people touching my ears. First she rubs them with alcohol, and then she sticks needles in them.

"This one is the lung point," she says. "Sometimes people complain about this one."

Ow. This is a de-stress treatment?

The textured paint on the walls is Rosewater. On the table next to my elevated divan: sandalwood incense; a green ceramic dish with something that looks like a pile of moss on it; a small box of Tai Chi brand, Superior Quality, one-use-only, .16-millimeter-gauge acupuncture needles. There is also a small, red, plastic bio-hazardous waste container.



Berg and her partner, Kevin Meddleton, of *Alaska Center for Acupuncture*, ask about my coffee habits.

"One cup every day," I answer. "Sometimes more."

I always feel like a bad child in a doctor's office. Yet here the presumptive discomfort is mitigated not only by the décor, but the doctors' divan side manners. Part of this job, she has said, is knowing how to differentiate between her mental baggage and mine.

"When I close that door, I leave my 'stuff' outside," she said.

She becomes, she said, my whole body's observer and advocate: using every sense she can to diagnose it.

She checks my tongue's color and coat, describing along the way how, for example, scalloping on the edges can really show what's going on with a body. It is a kind of science.

She has said that instead of sticking to a traditional regime, she takes whatever works out and uses it - later, she'll teach me a method from a different medicinal tradition to help me focus. And she asks me what's going on in my life. Everything matters. This takes time (many visits, she said) and it's substantially different from the usual paying-by-the-minute feel of HMO care.

My tongue, I learn, is a little light, a little pink, but she assures me it has a healthy white coat.

And I was worried about the needles.

What does my tongue have to do with needles? Why would touching my feet send a headache away? And will my insurance pay for this, whether it works or not?

The answer to the last question, at least, is definitively no - although more and more lately, insurance companies are covering so-called "complementary" or "alternative" treatments.

### **What is chi, anyway?**

There's a lot to Eastern medicine that makes Western practitioners nervous.

"You can't see energy under a microscope," Kevin Meddleton said helpfully.

Acupuncture is based on the Chinese-described human bioenergetic system (compare with "biochemical"). The body diagram looks sort of like that of a nervous system, but the lines, or meridians, run straight down the body.

Energy - chi, if you like - runs down these meridians with a smooth flow when things are going well, and either too fast, too slow or in the wrong direction when not.

A very thin needle carefully inserted into the proper point can add, subtract or redirect chi. The connectivity throughout means that a needle in the foot can fix what's wrong in the head, or vice versa; it's all been worked out over the centuries.

There's been a Western attempt to understand the biochemistry of acupuncture. National Institute of Health researchers linked the bloodstreams of rabbits they needed with rabbits in a needle-free group. Then they watched all the rabbits react to the endorphins that the first group produced.

Some of the therapy's effectiveness has been couched in terms of the placebo effect.

Palmer acupuncturist Michael Wedge, a former paramedic who now specializes in chronic pain and women's health, said the biochemical explanations have been unsatisfying so far.

"It doesn't explain why you can use a point on the ankle and stop the hot flashes," he said.

Berg and Meddleton were both trained in veterinary science at Cornell University. They maintain that it's not necessary to completely understand the mechanisms by which acupuncture works. The point is that it does work. And that's not so different from Western medicine.

"We don't know how aspirin works," Meddleton said, shrugging.

### **The ambiguity of disease**

Western medicine, they said, is great for certain things: Acute conditions. Heart surgery, for example. It should be part of the spectrum of health care that includes exercise, nutrition, yoga, massage, pharmacology and acupuncture.

But science alone has failed to solve many medical problems.

"There are so many diseases that are just syndromes," said Kalpana Patankar, a pediatrician in Pennsylvania for 25 years who abandoned her practice to do acupuncture. "What is chronic fatigue? There are no easy answers."

As an M.D., Patankar specialized in nebulous, chronic problems like developmental or emotional syndromes - which are precisely what Western medicine is worst at treating, she said. Doctors must compartmentalize bodies, and they are trained to eliminate answers until they find the right one.

"It was not fulfilling to just give a pill and expect someone to get better," she said.

Now, Patankar said, she most often treats depression, fatigue of unknown provenance, addictions (of all kinds), eating disorders and menopausal symptoms. She has not had a lot of success with joint pain, which typically builds up over a long time.

"You're not going to be able to fix a leaning cypress," she said.

And she's not going to tell someone with multiple sclerosis that he'll be able to walk.

"I can't make a deal like that," she said.

But in such a situation, where only part of the pain is physical, she can still help. She can teach them, she said, "to know that they are far greater than all their limitations.

She, Berg and Meddleton spoke of instigating people's own capacity to heal.

A practical example, Berg said, is that of curing addictions. Once a person learns to differentiate psychological and physiological cravings, they become easier to manage. It's about realizing that we have a choice, she said.

"We are personally responsible for our sickness and health - before and after problems arise," Meddleton said.

"They're really transforming how they live their life, so they know they have the capacity to shift something deeply within them," said Patankar of her clients.

### **One-hit wonder**

Most of the six or seven needles that sat in my ears, hands and feet didn't hurt. Some of them were intended to displace energy, and some, tweaked slightly, were to add energy. The moss, it turned out, was part of the therapy.

After the needles came out, Berg put little bits of the moss on a special point on my foot, lit it, and snatched it away just as I felt warmth. This, I learned, was also to add energy. When she took my six pulses on each wrist again, Berg said they'd lost that artificial spring that comes from a caffeine buzz. When I left Berg and Meddleton's office, I had two hours and three deadlines to meet. Yet I wasn't worried, and I didn't need the usual mandatory caffeine. This anomaly could well be explained as the effect of spending an hour meditating in a quiet room. But, I admit, it could well have been the needles and the moss.