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Heart to Heart Talk

with Philip S. Chua, M.D.

ACUPUNCTURE: A STICKY ISSUE

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture is a Chinese method of encouraging the body to promote natural healing and improve bodily function by inserting super fine needles into precise acupuncture points in the body and/or applying heat or electrical stimulation at these specific points.

How old is this modality?

Acupuncture has been practiced for over 5000 years. However, the first record of Acupuncture was found in the 4,700 year-old Huang Di Nei Jing (Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine), which is considered the oldest medical textbook in the world. Acupuncture is said to have been theorized even earlier by Shen Nung, the father of Chinese medicine, who also documented his theories on the heart, circulation, and pulse over 400 years before Europeans had any concept about them.

What is the basis for acupuncture?

The popular classical Chinese explanation on how acupuncture works states that channels of energy run in regular patterns through our body and over its surface. This energy force is known as Qi (pronounced Chee). The channels through which the energy flows are called Meridians, which are compared to rivers flowing to the body to irrigate and nourish the tissues. Blood flow and nerve impulses also follow Meridians. An obstruction to the movement of this energy leads to a backup in the flow (like a dam) to one part of the body and restricts it in others, eventually causing disease. The meridians can be influenced by needling the acupuncture points to unblock the obstruction and reestablish the regular normal flow pattern.

What is the modern explanation for its action?

There are two major concepts in modern science which attempt to explain how acupuncture works: 1. Needling the acupuncture points stimulates the

nervous system to release chemicals in the muscles, spinal cord and brain. These natural chemicals will either alter the experience of pain or trigger the excretion of other hormones or chemicals in the body that will lead to internal auto-regulation; and, 2. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), YIN represents "-" (negative) and YANG represents "+" (positive). The main principle is to keep the YIN and the YANG balance or bring the YIN and YANG back to the normal balance. YIN-YANG balance is the healthy state of the body. When the positive and negative charges in the bio-electrons are not balanced, disease occurs. Acupuncture is claimed to be able to force the bio-electrons to resume their normal movement patterns and balance.

What are the other related acupuncture procedures?

Electro-acupuncture is administered through acupuncture needles, using very small electrical impulses, and generally for analgesia (pain control). The power used is only a few micro amperes, but the frequency of the current varies from 5 to 2000 Hz. Other methods to stimulate acupuncture points are now being used, like Laser and Sonogram (sound waves). Another is Moxibustion, treatment using heat applied to acupuncture points. Cupping is another form, where suction from a jar made of metal, wood or glass (where partial vacuum has been created) is used to stimulate acupuncture points. One of the most popular is Accupressure, where no needles are used.

What are the effects of acupuncture?

No definite scientific proofs are available but claims have been made that some of the good effects of acupuncture are: raising the level of hormones, prostaglandins, white blood counts, gamma globulins, opsonins and overall improvement in the body's immune system; stimulating the secretion of endomorphins (enkephalins) which alleviate aches and pains; affecting the neurotransmitters (serotonins and noradrenalins); closing the "Motor Gate" through which pains pass so pain is halted and is not felt.

Does acupuncture cure any disease?

While acupuncture has been known to relieve aches and pains from injuries or arthritis, there are no convincing medical studies to prove that organic diseases have been cured by acupuncture. Migraine headaches, anxiety and other psychological disorders, smoking or alcohol addiction, low back aches are some conditions where acupuncture appears to be effective in some cases. Cancer, obviously, cannot be cured by acupuncture, but the myth persists.

Can acupuncture substitute for general anesthesia?

There have been anecdotal reports that abdominal and chest surgeries have been done under acupuncture with the patients awake and talking. Again, there are no documented evidences that these are true. The proponents reported the first

successful use of Electro-acupuncture in 1958 in China for tonsillectomy. Analgesia (pain control) seems to be the most popular action of acupuncture, where it is effective to a certain extent for certain people. I tried acupuncture for my tennis elbow about 15 years ago. Insertion of the hair-like acupuncture needles was practically painless except for mild stinging sensation. By the way, I did not obtain any relief. A friend of mine who had it done that same day did.

How can acupuncture hurt people?

When sick people become irrational and fanatical about acupuncture, or about any other non-conventional form of medical treatment, resulting in the delay in diagnosis and treatment of their illness by a physician, this could lead to unnecessary increase in the risk, complications and mortality. Some preventable deaths due to delayed diagnosis and treatment have been reported among patients who insisted on nothing else but on acupuncture or on alternative medicine in the treatment of their organic illnesses. Modern medical technology is here. Let us allow these proven advances to help us prevent diseases and maintain good health.

Readers are invited to send in their medical questions for possible inclusion in future column. Mail your questions to Heart to Heart Talk c/o the author at Cebu Cardiovascular Center, Cebu Doctors' Hospital, Osmeña Boulevard, Cebu City, Philippines, or email them to heart@chua.net

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