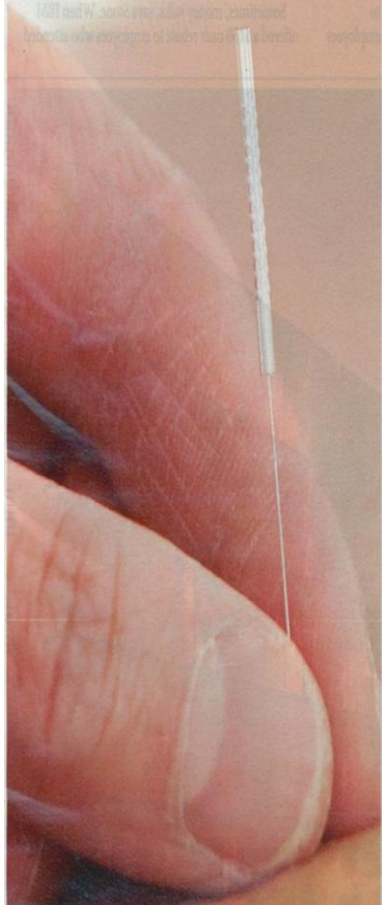


Pressure a good thing, up to a point

Western doctors are now much more comfortable recommending traditional Chinese medicine, writes DR MALCOLM CLARK.



FIVE THOUSAND years ago, a Chinese warrior returned from battle with a nasty arrow wound near his left knee. He had always complained to his local doctor about a rumbling irritable bowel, but noticed the day after the arrow had been pulled out his symptoms mysteriously disappeared. This was the beginning of acupuncture ... or so the story goes.

Over the centuries, traditional Chinese medicine doctors noticed that certain maladies caused specific areas on the body to become tender. If these tender spots were vigorously massaged (acupressure), or a fine needle pushed into the tender spot, often the symptoms would become less severe, or sometimes go away completely.

Some spots were noticed to be more effective than others for certain sorts of problems, so a system of treating illness with needles was developed. Chinese herbal medicine developed around the same time, as did using diet to treat medical problems.

Understanding the philosophy of traditional Chinese medicine takes many years of training. The first step is to turn away from scientific Western medicine for a while and to learn to look at things in other ways.

Examination is the same, just without blood tests and X-rays. Feeling for tender points, examining the hands, feet, the ears, looking for coating of the tongue, as well as feeling for subtle variations in wrist pulses. Symptoms also mean different things: heat, cold, dampness, imbalance and phlegm.

Restoring order and balance to the meridians of the body's organ system is the aim of treatment, restoring the balance of yin and yang, and getting your qi (vital energy) moving properly again.

Tender points are just as important in Western medicine, and sometimes just as mysterious.

In fibromyalgia, a condition often associated with chronic fatigue syndrome, the diagnosis is confirmed by discovering certain tender points around the neck, upper back and buttocks. We really don't know why these points become tender, or how the condition develops, but acupuncture can be helpful.

Even plain old appendicitis can be a little mysterious. Last century a famous American surgeon, Dr Charles McBurney, noticed that people who have appendicitis usually develop a tender spot an inch to the right and below the belly button, thereafter known as McBurney's point. You would assume the infected appendix would always be under the tender spot, but sometimes at operation it's found some distance away, even down near the hip bone, on the other side of the abdomen.

There is still much controversy about how acupuncture works. Different theories abound, each going in and out of fashion, but so far there is little to explain how sticking a needle into someone, or using a low-energy laser, helps them get better.

Of course, sceptics are of the opinion that it's all in the mind. If you believe it will work, you just might get better, and there is no more to it than that. A counter-point: acupuncture is often used to treat illness in animals. How do you explain to an unhappy dog or cat that its irritable bowel or biting problem is going to get better with trendy acupuncture?

Also in China, where there is a great deal more research into the use of acupuncture, there has been a lot of good work looking at how it affects pain thresholds in animals, raising the pain threshold, and making a happier, friskier Fido or Felix.

In Europe, the US and Australia there have been several peer-reviewed, quality studies showing acupuncture works well, especially for lower-back and

neck pain, arthritis and urinary tract problems.

In exotic places, the men who use elephants as tractors and forklifts have used the 89 known pressure/acupuncture points on the body of their elephants to help drive them around safely and happily for more than 1000 years. They also rub and stimulate these points to keep their mighty chariots and breadwinners on the road and healthy.

Acupuncturists and traditional Chinese medicine specialists claim that when an area of the body becomes damaged or diseased, nerve fibres from that area send messages back to the spinal cord, and then to the brain, to tell us there's something going wrong. Some of those signals, when they reach the spinal cord, bounce alarm messages down along other local nerve fibres to skin and muscle, perhaps producing a tender spot. When that tender spot is stimulated with a needle, hopefully producing a non-tender, deep, aching sensation, this message heads off to the spinal cord, brain and diseased area, helping it to heal.

ACUPUNCTURE is best known in Australia for treating chronic pain. Chronic lower-back pain, neck pain or crippling painful arthritis is probably bread and butter for most acupuncturists. It's useful for all sorts of other things, too: fatigue, irritable bowel, allergies, morning sickness and as an energy and immune system booster for people with chronic illness such as diabetes, cancer and rheumatoid arthritis. It's actually quite good for preventing recurrent migraines and other sorts of headaches.

But does it hurt? Everyone asks this question. The needles are sharp and very thin. Few people even feel the needle enter the skin and complain of a discomforting ache only when it reaches the right place. If you're squeamish about needles, ask for a laser as most acupuncture doctors also have one or know someone who does. The laser is strong enough to stimulate the acupuncture point but not strong enough to elicit even a heat sensation on the skin. It seems to work just as well as needles for most problems.

Acupuncture is simple and it works. It seems to have survived the test of time, and the more we learn about it, the more uses we find for it. It is by no means a panacea but certainly seems to help some people when other, more conventional, treatments fail. It works like a miracle in one in every 100 cases, and works very well in three out of every six.

For one in six it might only work weakly, and in one in six dogs, cats, horses, elephants or humans it doesn't work at all. But whatever the case, unlike with drugs, there are no long-term side-effects from acupuncture.

editorial@theweeklyreview.com.au

FDA SAYS YES! It's official. If you haven't heard, acupuncture works, is totally harmless and even has the approval of the American Food and Drug Administration. The ancient art is starting to gain more credence from the scientific world as a useful treatment for a wide variety of problems. Pain, of course, is the best-researched area showing how useful acupuncture is, especially compared with other physical treatments. Migraine, vertigo, persistent sinusitis, allergies, menstrual problems and irritable bowel syndrome all have some reasonable evidence to back up the use of needles or laser for safe and effective treatment.