

Acupuncture 101, a student view

“May the medicine be for you as it is for me, the fulfillment of a search for a congenial system of healing that embodies the inseparability of body and mind, spirit and matter, nature and man, philosophy and reality; a personal, subtle, gentle, yet highly technical medical system, which allows you to be close to essence-to the life force-both your own and that of others.

The reasons for using it, teaching it, and discussing it are twofold. First, it works. Second, it is a masterpiece of harmony, intricacy, and movement, which never ceases to engage, fascinate and intrigue. It surrounds us like nature, or a great work of art. We are consumed and renewed at one time.”

Leon Hammer, M.D., founder and instructor, Dragon Rises College of Oriental Medicine

Chinese medicine is more than acupuncture. Many people may be familiar with the hair-thin needles an acupuncture practitioner uses to help the body balance energy in the meridians, or channels. But they may not be as familiar with the rest of the tools acupuncturists use regularly to facilitate healing in a patient. The goal of acupuncture is always homeostasis, that balanced place of harmony within the body, mind and spirit where optimum health resides.

What is involved in learning and practicing Chinese medicine? Recently I questioned some senior students of Dragon Rises College of Oriental Medicine, all graduating in December, to find out.

I asked David Yeh, *What is the underlying philosophy of Oriental medicine and acupuncture?* He said:

In brief, the philosophy may best be described as ecological. A good illustration of this is the concept of *qi*, one of the most well-known theories of acupuncture. Qi, often translated as "vital energy," is a crucial part of acupuncture theory; the acupuncture meridians that extend throughout the body are often described as "rivers of qi." But qi is more than just energy; it incorporates other ideas such as flow or circulation, quality, and relationship.

“Think of a river flowing through an ecosystem. Does it flow well, does the water circulate smoothly? What is the quality of the water? Does the river exert a healthy influence on the surrounding landscape and its inhabitants, and vice versa?

“The ecological approach of Oriental medicine means that not only are individual symptoms studied and diagnosed, but the whole picture, the composite, is as well. The understanding is that a disruption in one aspect can disrupt everything else as well, and a problem may need to be examined on many different levels to be fully comprehended. Thus, both diagnosis and treatment are aimed at the restoration of

ecological balance. This approach yields a complex and deep appreciation of complex and deep human beings.”

What does it take to be a licensed practitioner of acupuncture? Jo Dempsey says, “Curiosity! What are and how do the energy pathways of the body work? What’s the best lifestyle and diet to engender health? The ancient Chinese knew the answers to these questions! After curiosity, an acupuncture student needs tenacity! At Dragon Rises College, the level of education is very high and the basics are taught very thoroughly, so it takes over three years to finish the program.”

Another student, Katharine Morse, answered this way:

I began my journey at Dragon Rises College of Oriental Medicine three years ago and am entering my last semester. The western classes include anatomy, psychology, pharmacology, nutrition, medical research and environmental medicine. The Oriental medicine classes teach not only about the points, their location and indicated use, but also their associated meridians – the energetic way that the points are related.

At our college in particular we spend a lot of time learning the Hammer-Shen pulse diagnosis system that Dr. Leon Hammer learned and developed from his studies with Dr. Shen in China; we also learn facial and tongue diagnosis, palpation, indications and pattern symptoms. We take qi gong classes to improve our physical, mental and emotional health. In other classes we practice using needles and other techniques (gua sha, cupping, tuina, herbs). Herbs and herbal formulas are a large part of the program.

Clinic experience begins the second semester with observation of interns and licensed practitioners. After five of the ten semester program students become practitioners and treat patients in clinic. I will be taking board exams this semester as I step closer to my goal of becoming a licensed acupuncture physician.

I wondered, how does becoming a practitioner of acupuncture and Oriental medicine transform you physically, mentally, and spiritually? Jo said, “I feel much more empowered at this point in my education, because I have a solid understanding of why and how Chinese medicine works. And I am so grateful for this increased knowledge and awareness as applied to my own life. My health has completely turned around since I’ve started school. I once more feel like the world is my oyster.”

Katharine says, “For me this three year odyssey has been transforming. I am learning to take better care of myself physically, mentally and spiritually and recognize it as a life long transformation that is just beginning. I am learning to listen better; I am learning to value the food I ingest and to protect myself from exposure to those things that might be emotionally harmful. I think this journey has allowed me to be a more spiritual person though I know that I do need to practice more.”

So what is it like to get an acupuncture treatment, what is involved? Katharine continues,

“In our clinic the intake is quite extensive. We take a medical and birth history, do a complete facial, tongue and pulse diagnosis and spend time listening to the patient. After coming to a diagnosis the patient could receive a treatment that includes one or more of the following techniques: acupuncture, cupping, gua sha, moxibustion, tuina or herbs. The patient generally lies on a treatment table for comfort. Acupuncture needles are small filiform needles. Cupping and gua sha are techniques that help move the qi without using needles. Moxibustion is warming. Herbal formulas may be prescribed; they come in several forms including raw, dried decoctions and tea pills.”

She said a mouthful! Let’s break it down. A practitioner begins with a patient by listening and asking questions (the medical and birth history above). This portion of the exam is time-consuming, yet crucial to the diagnosis. What the person says, the words, descriptions, and tone of voice are all important information to the trained ear. Also the skin tone, posture, facial expressions, and overall affect are noted.

Then the acupuncturist will ask the patient to stick out his or her tongue, revealing so much about current conditions inside the body. Readers may know that a “coated” tongue occurs during illness, but the trained practitioner sees nuances you may never have imagined lying there.

Practitioners trained in Dr. Hammer’s pulse diagnosis will typically spend 30-45 minutes to feel and record the wealth of information told by the pulses. In contrast to “taking a pulse” in western medicine, acupuncturists identify details about a patient’s condition by noting the variations within twelve different pulses, at different levels (pressures), and a variety of locations on the patient’s wrists. As Katharine put it, “The pulse is the body’s medical report card.” Contemporary Pulse Diagnosis[©] provides a window into the patient’s condition that is not available any other way, allowing the practitioner to observe not only current barriers to full health, but warning of future problems before they develop. This makes the medicine preventative and proactive.

After developing a treatment plan, the acupuncturist provides a thorough treatment to address both immediate symptoms and long-term healing. Needles are utilized in specific points along the meridians, or energy channels in the body, as indicated by the plan. The scalp and the outer ears also contain points of access to organs and systems that can be nudged toward balance through the use of needles.

Needles are inserted carefully and precisely to achieve the intended effect. Typically the patient feels a slight prick as the needle enters the skin, then numbness, tingling, or sometimes an electric sensation as the needle connects with the qi, the patient’s energy. The patient rests with the needles in place for about twenty minutes.

Jo tells us, “Acupuncture treatments are usually much more than needles placed in the body. Sometimes acupuncture needles are “enhanced” by using placing a small amount of moxa, (an herb also known as mugwort), on the end of the needle. This causes the needle to get hot deep into the acupuncture point. Moxa can also be used without needles on specific acupuncture points.”

Cupping is another technique, used to move stagnant or trapped energy (western parlance would be metabolic waste in the muscles), for example with back pain, old injuries, and to clear the

lungs of excess moisture. Gua sha is Oriental body work, also used to get a patient's stuck energy moving.

Herbal medicine is a vast and profound area of practice for acupuncturists, allowing the treatment to continue throughout the days or weeks between visits. Practitioners have been trained to understand how the herbs in formulas interact to achieve optimum healing, having studied over 500 individual herbs and hundreds of traditional formulas. Herbs are said to "enter the channels" in specific ways to support the healing started in an appointment. Chinese herbal medicine can also stand alone, as a treatment for those who are afraid of needles or too weak to tolerate other treatments.

Individual herbs may also be combined in a formula written specifically for one person, and made available in raw form or as a powder. Raw herbs are the most effective, but require the patient to simmer them at home for about an hour before consuming. Powdered herbs and formulas are also quite effective and can be customized for an individual. Patent formulas, herbs made into pill form, can be utilized for common ailments. Numerous traditional formulas have been developed over the centuries, and modern practitioners add to the body of formulas available every year.

How long has acupuncture been around? Jo notes that, "Written records go back for about 5,000 years, but the medicine probably was developing for about that long before being recorded." Candice adds, "The philosophy in which acupuncture was born (Taoism) was developed over 8,000 years ago." This medicine has indeed stood the test of time!

What kind of conditions/illnesses can be treated successfully with acupuncture? Lisa Braren stated, "Acute and chronic pain of arthritis, menstrual problems, headaches, GI disorders, stress, anxiety, sleep problems, soft tissue and sports injuries are among the many conditions that Acupuncture can treat. Acupuncture accomplishes this by promoting natural, maximum circulation of energy (Qi and Blood) and functioning of the body. The improved circulation helps the body remember its natural ability to heal itself and enables the nourishment of Blood and Oxygen to once again flow to, through and from the affected areas removing toxins and promoting healing."

Candice notes, "Because the approach of acupuncture/Oriental Medicine is to focus treatment on the individual, not the disease, Oriental Medicine can approach any situation. The most popular conditions acupuncture is recognized treating from the western perspective is Pain Management, Digestive Issues, Addiction relief and more recently Oncology and Neurological conditions such as stroke and cancer therapy support."

Jo contributed this reference: "The World Health Organization has an online document which summarizes conditions which can be treated with acupuncture with good results. The document is located at: <http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2002/9241545437.pdf>. There's a lot listed there." I took a look at this 80-page scientific report, and copied the list Jo referenced for this article.

One final question, *does it hurt?* Not surprisingly, each person's experience is different. Candice says, "Typically, the anticipation of pain is what makes an acupuncture treatment unpleasant. If a patient is in a lot of pain the needles serve great relief when inserted into the

body, if a patient is experiencing severe nausea or digestive issues, the needles can alleviate discomfort very quickly. The minimal amount of pain, described as a “pinching” sensation, that the patient may or may not experience during an acupuncture treatment is by and large buried under the wave of relaxation and relief that accompany insertion.”

Written collaboratively by Kate Ellison, Autumn Grubb, Ruth Hayes-Morrison, David Yeh, Jo Dempsey, Katharine Morse, Lisa Braren, and Candice Nelms.

[below is an interesting sidebar]

The Provision of Acupuncture Care in the United States

Ted J. Kaptchuk, OMD has written extensively about acupuncture, notably the book *The Web That Has No Weaver*. In talking about the development of the profession in 2002, he states:

In 1976, California became the first state to license acupuncture as an independent health care profession. Since then, 40 states and the District of Columbia have adopted similar laws. Most states²⁷ allow herbal medicine within the scope of acupuncture practice; only a few states¹⁰ require the supervision of a physician for the almost 11,000 practicing nonphysician acupuncturists.

The number of acupuncturists is rapidly growing and is projected to double by 2005 and quadruple by 2015¹⁰⁷. The typical education standard for an acupuncturist is between 2000 and 3000 hours of training in independently accredited master’s degree 4-year schools.

See the full article at

<http://www.acupuncture-schools.us/the-practice-of-acupuncture.cfm?show=2#2>

[on next pages you will find sidebar referred to in article]

Diseases and disorders that can be treated with acupuncture

The diseases or disorders for which acupuncture therapy has been tested in controlled clinical trials reported in the recent literature can be classified into four categories as shown below.

1. Diseases, symptoms or conditions for which acupuncture has been proved— through controlled trials—to be an effective treatment:

Adverse reactions to radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy
Allergic rhinitis (including hay fever)
Biliary colic
Depression (including depressive neurosis and depression following stroke)
Dysentery, acute bacillary
Dysmenorrhoea, primary
Epigastralgia, acute (in peptic ulcer, acute and chronic gastritis, and gastrospasm)
Facial pain (including craniomandibular disorders)
Headache
Hypertension, essential
Hypotension, primary
Induction of labour
Knee pain
Leukopenia
Low back pain
Malposition of fetus, correction of
Morning sickness
Nausea and vomiting
Neck pain
Pain in dentistry (including dental pain and temporomandibular dysfunction)
Periarthritis of shoulder
Postoperative pain
Renal colic
Rheumatoid arthritis
Sciatica
Sprain
Stroke
Tennis elbow

2. Diseases, symptoms or conditions for which the therapeutic effect of acupuncture has been shown but for which further proof is needed:

Abdominal pain (in acute gastroenteritis or due to gastrointestinal spasm)
Acne vulgaris
Alcohol dependence and detoxification
Bell's palsy
Bronchial asthma
Cancer pain
Cardiac neurosis
Cholecystitis, chronic, with acute exacerbation
Cholelithiasis
Competition stress syndrome
Craniocerebral injury, closed
Diabetes mellitus, non-insulin-dependent
Earache
Epidemic haemorrhagic fever
Epistaxis, simple (without generalized or local disease)
Eye pain due to subconjunctival injection
Female infertility
Facial spasm
Female urethral syndrome
Fibromyalgia and fasciitis
Gastrokinetic disturbance
Gouty arthritis
Hepatitis B virus carrier status
Herpes zoster (human (alpha) herpesvirus 3)
Hyperlipaemia
Hypo-ovarianism
Insomnia
Labour pain
Lactation, deficiency
Male sexual dysfunction, non-organic
Ménière disease

Neuralgia, post-herpetic
Neurodermatitis
Obesity
Opium, cocaine and heroin dependence
Osteoarthritis
Pain due to endoscopic examination
Pain in thromboangiitis obliterans
Polycystic ovary syndrome (Stein–Leventhal syndrome)
Postextubation in children
Postoperative convalescence
Premenstrual syndrome
Prostatitis, chronic
Pruritus
Radicular and pseudoradicular pain syndrome
Raynaud syndrome, primary
Recurrent lower urinary-tract infection
Reflex sympathetic dystrophy
Retention of urine, traumatic
Schizophrenia
Sialism, drug-induced
Sjögren syndrome
Sore throat (including tonsillitis)
Spine pain, acute
Stiff neck
Temporomandibular joint dysfunction
Tietze syndrome
Tobacco dependence
Tourette syndrome
Ulcerative colitis, chronic
Urolithiasis
Vascular dementia
Whooping cough (pertussis)

3. Diseases, symptoms or conditions for which there are only individual controlled trials reporting some therapeutic effects, but for which acupuncture is worth trying because treatment by conventional and other therapies is difficult:

Chloasma
Choroidopathy, central serous
Colour blindness
Deafness
Hypophrenia
Irritable colon syndrome
Neuropathic bladder in spinal cord injury
Pulmonary heart disease, chronic
Small airway obstruction

4. Diseases, symptoms or conditions for which acupuncture may be tried provided the practitioner has special modern medical knowledge and adequate monitoring equipment:

Breathlessness in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
Coma
Convulsions in infants
Coronary heart disease (angina pectoris)
Diarrhoea in infants and young children
Encephalitis, viral, in children, late stage
Paralysis, progressive bulbar and pseudobulbar