

From addictions to piercing

BY NAOMI FLESCHHUT

It appears that Western medicine ain't so Western anymore. There are now two free acupuncture clinics in Nova Scotia; one in Dartmouth, and the other in Metro Halifax. That's right, free...funded by government dollars, and provided to the public at no cost.

The relatively recent opening of these clinics sets a surprising precedent in the public health climate of Canada — as usual 'alternative' health practices like Naturopathy, traditional Chinese medicine, and even midwifery are not paid for under our Canadian health insurance plan. Indeed it has been an uphill battle for these types of healing practices to be recognized.

Yet, since July of 1999, the Dartmouth Hospital has been offering a free public acupuncture clinic, originally as part of a smoking cessation program, and now expanded to a five morning a week barrier-free clinic to treat the symptoms of withdrawal from addictions, as well as depression, anxiety, stress and disrupted sleeping patterns. The success of this program has enabled the opening of another free clinic, a little closer to home with Matrix Women's Services — a Halifax treatment centre for women.

Both these clinics use a five point system of auricular acupuncture — acupuncture on the ear — which was developed at the Lincoln Hospital into a procedure which is easily and effectively taught to health care workers unfamiliar with acupuncture.

This approach, though unorthodox within the history of Western medicine, has proven to be both very successful as well as quite inexpensive.

Health care workers are easily trained in this protocol, while the procedure does not practically require many inputs. After all — we are just talking about putting a couple needles in a person's ear and leading them through relaxation exercises with a cup of tea.

And yet the results have been dramatically positive. According to Chris Willette of Matrix Women's Services Clinic, there have been extensive clinical trials over the past 10 to 15 years which demonstrate that activating the pressure points used in auricular acupuncture does help the body detoxify and heal from an addictive illness; while it also helps even out the emotional symptoms like depression and anxiety.

The Lincoln protocol uses five such points on the ear to stimulate the patient's internal life energy — thereby positively affecting both the body and the psyche. Two of these points focus on relaxation: shen men and sympathetic. The other three points each correspond an organ in the body: the kidney, liver and lungs — and function to help move energy through these vital organs. During each treatment, the needles are left in place for forty-five minutes, while the participants are also lead through relaxation exercises, and can enjoy some detoxifying seven-herb tea.

It is interesting that these three particular organs are targeted under this treatment. According to Western medicine, the kidney, liver and lungs are organs of detoxification, while they are also those most affected by certain addictions. For example, the liver may become seriously diseased from alcohol abuse, while the lungs are obviously impacted by smoking addictions.

Yet in Eastern medicine, each of these organs has a significance beyond the biological. The lungs rep-

resent grief and letting go of the past; the liver gives focus and the ability to carry through with plans, while the kidney signifies courage and the control of fear. There seems to be a parallel here between the purely physical functions of these organs and their more metaphysical implications. Indeed in Eastern medicine, there is no real defined distinctions between the work of physical healing and emotional work.

Yet, until recently, Western medicine has typically been rigidly focused on the purely physical, rejecting any notion of the importance or existence of flows of energy within the body. This is at odds with the Chinese understanding of human biology, which indicates that the body can be mapped according to the flow of meridians of energy. Similar to the concept of Chakras, this involves an understanding that illnesses, both physical and mental, arise as the result of blockages of this flow; an imbalance in the body's energy. Acupuncture functions to attempt to restore balance, and resume the smooth flow of energy which leads to optimum health.

The skeptics may wonder how much of this healing is authentically related to the actual acupuncture, rather than just 'all in the mind,' as they say. Is it possible that the proven benefits of this procedure arise from the simple therapeutic effects of gathering together regularly with others who experience similar problems, relaxing and feeling as though one is being healed?

Though Chris Willette acknowledges the potential beneficial healing effects of "being in a room of like-minded people," she mentions that there has been clinical research which accounts for this possibility. Controlled trials in the United States studied whether or not the five pressure points used are actually relevant to healing. Some of the participants received acupuncture using the five standards points, while others had needles placed in five irrelevant points on the ear. The result was that there is a statistically significant difference between the average relapse times of the participants, with the control group returning to addictive behaviours in a shorter period of time.

It is not surprising, then that acupuncture has been gaining a widespread, popular acceptance, particularly in the US. Willette mentioned that in parts of California and New York, "persons who are harmfully involved in substance abuse are mandated by the courts for acupuncture therapy."

Don Himmelman, who has incorporated his training in acupuncture into his work in the field of drug dependency, said that although this use of acupuncture is "setting a precedent in Eastern Canada and Canada as a whole," this method has been around for 20 years, and is now used in over 1000 clinics internationally. Five hundred out of 10,000 US addiction clinics use acupuncture, while here at home the Mount Sinai hospital in Toronto has incorporated an acupuncture program to treat reactions to chemotherapy and post-operative pain. In fact, according to Chris Willette, the Medical School at McMaster University is planning to undertake a large research project on acupuncture.

This growing trend probably has as much to do with the low costs

of acupuncture its proven benefits. But perhaps it also reflects a growing questioning of the limits of the typical reductionist approach inherent in much of Western medicine. With the increasing incidence of environmental illnesses, along with the higher costs of our under-funded health care system, people are searching for a more holistic perspective on health. One which also focuses more on prevention and non-intrusive healing rather than high-end and invasive procedures.

And in such conditions as substance addiction, many contemporary treatments simply cannot treat the full range of ailments which are associated with addiction, such as mental and emotional stresses. Acupuncture thus provides an alternative method which treats not only the biological consequences of addiction, but also provides therapy for the more elusive afflictions of the mind and soul.

For more information on the barrier-free public acupuncture clinics, contact Matrix Women's Services, or Simpson Hall of the Dartmouth Hospital.

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