

# The Austin American-Statesman Online Archives

A STICKY SUBJECT

Austin acupuncturists point out that it's not all about needles

BYLINE: Sarah Adams, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

DATE: May 10, 2004

PUBLICATION: Austin American-Statesman (TX)

SECTION: Lifestyle

It's the needles that bother people most. "The very first time I was petrified," says Danny Smith, co-owner of the Beauty Lounge hair salon. "I thought it was going to be this excruciating thing."

But needles are not the solitary focus of acupuncture, the traditional Chinese medical treatment. As acupuncture penetrates more deeply into the American mainstream -- especially in Austin, which has always had an appetite for "alternative" -- the treatments are more likely to include diet, herbs and massage.

Suddenly, acupuncture is everywhere. Twelve years ago, when Smith first sought treatment, acupuncturists were harder to find than a needle in a strip mall. Today, even as doubt about its effectiveness persists among medical doctors, more than 80 practitioners are listed in one Austin telephone directory.

According to the Texas State Board of Medical Examiners, the number of licensed acupuncturists in Texas has risen from about 258 in 2000 to 557 as of January 2004. To study the ancient practice at an accredited Texas school, prospective students must earn at least 60 hours of undergraduate credit, including a class in anatomy and physiology. Once admitted, students spend three to five years studying herbology, more anatomy and physiology and the art of needles itself. They spend hours in classrooms studying and practicing on clients willing to submit to a student session for a discounted price.

Smith goes to an acupuncturist periodically to treat allergies, bronchitis and everyday stress. Most times he'll even fall asleep during a treatment -- so much for the fear of pain. As part of his alternative regimen, Smith also takes herbs twice a day and watches his diet.

"Spicy food can throw your body off balance," says Smith's current acupuncturist, Sadie Minkoff. "People are often surprised at that one."

Acupuncture goes much deeper than a pincushion session in a feng shui-balanced room. There's pulse-checking, questions about general health and environment and a glance at the tongue to determine deficiencies or imbalances in the body. Someone complaining of bronchitis or fever with a fast pulse and yellow-coated tongue might be said to have excess congested qi, the Chinese term for energy or life force.

And then there are the herbs. Acupuncturists use nearly 500 types of traditional plant derivatives -- including, in the past, ephedra. The federal Food and Drug Administration, blaming ephedra for 155 deaths nationwide, banned it effective April 12.

"If you come in for acupuncture once a week, that's great, but if you take herbs twice a day, it's a mini-treatment every time you take them," says Minkoff. "Powdered or raw herbs are great because you can combine them. I can tailor a formula that is very individualized."

With or without the herbs, needles are still part of acupuncture. The process involves tapping individually wrapped, single-use needles into points in the skin to even out the qi's flow. These days, acupuncture is aimed at relieving the symptoms of stress, pain, HIV/AIDS, menopause, PMS, addiction and more. It isn't painful, but slight pinching or burning might surround the pierced area for a few minutes, and the skin might bruise.

The alternative medicine draws criticism or distrust from some in the Western medical field. Dr. John McFarlane of the Austin Ear, Nose and Throat Clinic treats many patients with allergies and asthma, both ailments that acupuncture is reputed to relieve. He says he does not know enough about acupuncture and Chinese medicine to believe in its effectiveness beyond pain management.

"Part of the problem is, as we study physiology and anatomy and those sorts of things, it doesn't make sense that you should put a needle in someone's ear and have them stop smoking," he says.

McFarlane sent a few of his patients who couldn't quit smoking any other way to try acupuncture, which he thinks helped them psychologically get over their addictions. Although the treatments were successful, he thinks the practice has more of a placebo effect, especially when it comes to herbs and allergies.

Some treatments call for moxibustion, the process of burning the plant moxa, or mugwort, over the needles or on the skin. The plant is rolled into sticks or cones; more processed pieces look black and chalky like coal. In some cases the mugwort is placed directly on the skin, turning it red or even scarring it,

but most often, the mugwort only warms the skin. The process is said to increase the circulation of qi.

Many also practice bodywork, or massage therapy, in Western and Eastern forms. Cupping, for instance, helps rejuvenate qi or relieve pain, Minkoff says. She holds out a glass jar about the size of a small closed fist. After lighting a cotton swab and holding it inside the cup for a few seconds, she quickly places the cup on a fellow acupuncturist's arm to demonstrate. The suction from the de-oxygenated air causes her skin to puff up inside the glass and turn red. The cups may be used over needles or by themselves.

Each person reacts differently to foods and herbs, making self-diagnosis and treatment risky for nonprofessionals. Like any supplement, if taken incorrectly, some herbs can fail to heal an ailment or even make it worse. The ban on ephedra worries practitioners like Minkoff, who divides her time between White Crane Healing Arts and Central Austin Acupuncture Group.

"We've used it for thousands of years and nobody got hurt because people were educated about it," Minkoff says. "Herbs are very safe, effective and affordable when used properly by a licensed professional." She and others say the law is too broad and think the herb is safe with supervised use.

McFarlane, a fellow of the American Academy of Otolaryngic Allergy, still distrusts herb use by the public because of dangers like ephedra.

"Austin has almost a cult following of folks who look to herbs," he says, adding, "I have no objection if the herb seems to be safe. There are things that started out as herbal remedy or herbal usage that have been purified and codified and put in the market. We know then when we take a pill how many milligrams are in it and how it reacts with other medication."

Dr. John Chen, an authority on Chinese herbal medicine and Western pharmacology, does not think herbs should be so distrusted.

"I feel that the FDA is trying to do the right thing," says Chen, a professor at the University of Southern California School of Pharmacy. He supports banning over-the-counter sales of certain drugs, but says health-care practitioners like acupuncturists should still be able to prescribe them. He says less than 5 to 10 percent of 500 or so herbs commonly in use might have a reaction with Western medications.

With more and more Texans studying acupuncture and Chinese medicine, the frontiers between Eastern and Western medicine might become more open. Nearly 500 students are enrolled in Austin's two licensed acupuncture

schools, the Academy of Oriental Medicine in Austin and the Texas College of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

With two of the state's four board-accredited acupuncture colleges in Austin, the city seems more receptive to alternative forms of medicine. Or, as Smith puts it, "This is a town that gave birth to Whole Foods. This town has been overrun with hippies since before there were hippies."

## Talk the talk

**Traditional Chinese medicine** — The practice dates back several thousand years and encompasses acupuncture, massage techniques such as tui na and gua sha, herbal medicine, martial arts such as tai chi or qigong, and more.

**Acupuncture** — Hair-thin needles are placed along acupuncture points on the body to treat pain or other health issues

**Qi** — Pronounced 'chee,' the Chinese term means energy or vital force. Imbalanced qi is corrected through practices like acupuncture.

**Meridians** — During acupuncture, needles are placed along the pathways, or meridians, through which qi flows.

**Electroacupuncture** — A version of acupuncture in which the needles are stimulated electronically to help stir up stagnated qi or reduce accumulated qi associated with chronic pain.

**Moxibustion** — A heated herb commonly known as mugwort is placed over the needle or skin to increase the flow of qi and warm the meridians for those suffering from cold or stagnant conditions.

**Acupressure** — For those who cannot or do not wish to have needles inserted into their skin, acupressure follows the same lines using pressure, usually from fingers or toes, to relieve stress or pain.