

Needle fixation

IN THE LATE 1960s, when methadone was first prescribed for heroin users it was heralded as a breakthrough in the treatment of opiate abuse. Over the years, methadone prescribing has become common practice – it has become the 'Establishment' – no other treatment modality seriously challenging it. It has dominated the discourse around drug treatment, to such an extent that with the appearance of each new substance of abuse, drug workers have asked *what substitute can we prescribe? or even let's give them the real thing.*

Many have expressed reservations about the ethics of prescribing drugs to people to stop them taking drugs, but it has been the increase in the misuse of stimulants and abuse of 'dance drugs' in recent years that has spurred on a major rethink about the efficacy of substitute prescribing. As the Effectiveness Review concluded in relation to cocaine misuse, "pharmacotherapy does not appear to offer any great prospect of effectiveness".¹ But if substitute prescribing for stimulant users is problematic, it has been equally difficult for drug agencies to come up with other proven treatment options. At this point, it is usual to reach for the imponderable old faithfuls – counselling and support. Not that there's anything wrong with them in their proper context or as one element of treatment, but sometimes we offer them when better ideas escape us. This article is an attempt to explain one of those 'better ideas', an exciting, simple and cheap alternative to prescribing that is growing in popularity throughout Europe and America: acupuncture.

Please bear with me!

Although there has been a growing interest in natural healing methods in this country in recent years, the subject still raises a wry grin on the faces of the 'uninitiated'. The evidence is that people only begin to take alternative therapies and medicines seriously when they have worked either for themselves or for someone close to them. We have been conditioned to believe that traditional medicine is the be-all and end-all, but although we have to marvel at the advances made during its short history, we are still occasionally reminded that it does *not* have all

Acupuncture is becoming more and more popular as an alternative to substitute prescribing. But what is it, does it work, and why do we always suppress a titter every time it's mentioned?

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S U M M A R Y

The use of acupuncture as a drug treatment began in the mid-70s, but it has taken 20 years for it to catch on in Britain. There are both 'eastern' and 'western' explanations for its effectiveness. Both practitioners and recipients of 'acudetox' in America say that it not only eliminates pain, discomfort and craving, but that it is cheap, quick and addresses a client's mental and psychological state as well as their physical symptoms.

I am grateful to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for affording me the opportunity of spending seven weeks in America to study acupuncture

the answers. It is when people discover this that they look elsewhere for help.

But interest in acupuncture is growing in Britain. Before I went to America to study the use of acupuncture in drug treatment, I pinned a notice to the *Druglink* Connections page. I was amazed at the response from drug workers around the country who were not only interested in acupuncture (some were already using it in their agencies) but were crying out for a change in the way we respond to drug misuse. The solutions of the 1960s and 1970s were clearly not meeting these people's needs in the 1990s.

Of course, alternative therapies don't have all the answers either, but the growing number of drug agencies which are offering them are discovering and demonstrating their effectiveness over a wide range of substances. Not only do they reduce cravings and either partially or wholly overcome withdrawal symptoms, but they also build confidence and reactivate what Carl Rogers called the person's 'self-actualising' (or goal setting) process.

There are a number of alternative therapies and herbal remedies that can be employed in the detoxification and rehabilitation processes, but this article focuses on acupuncture, which seems to be most effective at the beginning of treatment. Specifically, I will concentrate on a particular branch of acupuncture called auricular – or ear – acupuncture, and the related detox process is referred to as acudetox.

The history of acudetox

As with many medical breakthroughs, acudetox was discovered by accident. In 1972, Doctors Wen and Cheung at the Kwong Wah hospital in Hong Kong were alerted to the possibility of detoxification through acupuncture when opium users told them that after surgery (for which acupuncture had been given as an anaesthetic) they noticed a distinct reduction in their craving for opium and that the withdrawal pains, with which they were so familiar, had either been minimised or had completely subsided.

This unexpected revelation led to further tests with acudetox. The doctors were able to withdraw a sample of 40 opiate users with a minimum of discomfort, and the reported results

were remarkably similar – reduced craving and pain. People also reported other beneficial effects, such as feeling warm, well, relaxed, less anxious and short-tempered.²

In 1974, impressed with Wen and Cheung's findings, the medical director of drug services at New York's Lincoln Hospital was trained in auricular acupuncture, and the hospital became one of the foremost centres for acudetox in the world. Between 1974 and 1987 it carried out a clinical survey of the effectiveness of acupuncture on 1500 substance users and found it to be vindicated as a treatment.

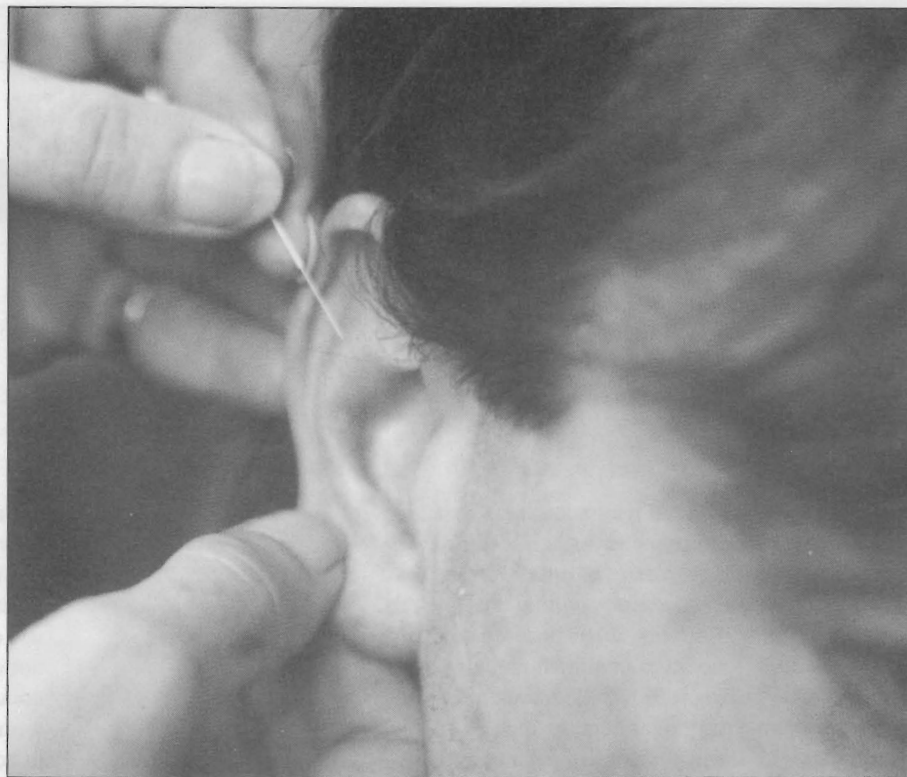
It has taken 20 years, but acudetox in America is now offered in over 500 centres. Between 200 and 250 clients choose acudetox *every day* at the Lincoln Hospital, even though there is a methadone clinic within easy reach. In California, 400 people daily attend a drug service for acudetox. The American National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) has over 4000 members, and is spreading its wings across the Atlantic along with acudetox itself. There is now a British branch of NADA, and a number of drug agencies in the UK offer acupuncture – London's Gateway Clinic, Bradford's Bridge Project and Manchester's DASH Project among them.

Acudetox is exciting,
simple and cheap –
and it works

So how does it work?

How exactly acupuncture affects a person's biochemical mechanisms is still largely a mystery, and the ancient Chinese theory of the Qi life force (pronounced 'chee') flowing through the body's 'meridian' channels is hardly likely to win the confidence of western medical practitioners! But what has most impressed those who have introduced acudetox is its 'holistic' healing effect. It doesn't just heal the 'body', as traditional medicine can; it helps heal the 'mind' and the 'soul'. Not only does acudetox reduce withdrawal pain and craving, but it also has both a calming and an energising effect.

That said, there is a paucity of methodologically sound research on the effects of acupuncture on dependency. A British literature review in 1990 found 22 controlled clinical studies in three fields



A word in your shell-like: holistic approaches such as 'acudetox' might be the answer

of dependency (smoking, drinking and heroin) but found that the research was generally of low quality.³ Most researchers have instead drawn on the experiential evidence of acudetox, and there is no doubt that further clinical trials would lead to a better understanding of how it works. However, acupuncture has been practiced for thousands of years, and in that time has been subjected to more 'clinical tests' than any drug or healing system that has been developed within the relatively short life of modern medicine.

The Chinese explanation

The Chinese version goes something like this. Acupuncture unblocks certain channels, allowing the body to heal itself. Fine needles are placed in specific points in the body which (through the meridian channels) link up with all the internal organs. The stimulation of the needles activates the body's own healing capacities, stimulates internal energy and strengthens defence mechanisms.⁴

There are over 200 acupuncture points around the shell of the ear, but the acudetox practitioner needs to know only five:

- the 'sympathetic', which acts on the autonomic nervous system (the part of the nervous system which regulates the muscles of the internal organs);
- the 'Shen Men', which alleviates anxiety and controls nervousness;
- the 'kidney', which helps the detoxification processes;
- the 'liver', which alleviates toxicity in the blood and stabilises impulsive

behaviour and mood swings;

- and the 'lung', which strengthens the immune system and promotes physical balance.

After the needles are inserted the person sits back and relaxes for three-quarters of an hour. Personally, I could not imagine 30 or 40 of our methadone clients sitting quietly for this length of time. But they do. When they arrive, patients are restless, talkative and moody, but once the pins are in, they just sit there pensively, with their eyes closed. After treatment, they are visibly more relaxed.

The western explanation

Before the discovery of the endogenous opiate system of endorphins in the human body, western understanding of acupuncture and acudetox was even more limited than it is now. Talk of life forces and holistic healing cut little ice, and acupuncture was as often as not seen as a placebo treatment.

A study of 'skid row' alcoholics has shown that acupuncture is definitely not a placebo.⁵ Over half the subjects who were given acupuncture at specific points completed the two-month course of therapy, while only three per cent of a control group given 'sham' acupuncture at non-specific points completed the course. A six-month follow up during which no interim treatment was given still showed that the 'real' treatment was given more effective, while three-quarters of those who had received it "undertook productive initiatives such as applying for

employment, enrolling in classes", compared to under half of the placebo-control group.

The discovery of the endogenous opiate system further filled in the missing gaps. In the 1970s, it was discovered that opiates bind to specific sites – receptors – throughout the body, and that the brain contains opiate-like substances, the endorphins.⁶ It has since been found that morphine and codeine themselves actually exist in the animal central nervous system.⁷ There is still much to be learned about the body's endogenous opioids, but these findings suggest that heroin and similar drugs trigger the body's pain-relieving system and amplify its effects.

It was also shown that the needles used in acupuncture stimulate peripheral nerves which send messages to the brain to produce endorphins.⁸ As a non-medical drug worker, I am hardly qualified to comment in detail, but for those who are looking for more clinically sound evidence, it is at least available.^{9,10}

Indicators of success

As this article has shown, various claims have been made for acudetox's effectiveness – it reduces fear, hostility, lessens depression, anxiety and insomnia, reduces the incidence of relapse, and patients with severe paranoia respond well to it.¹¹ But even if we leave these claims for the 'body, mind and soul' aside, perhaps the following tangible evidence – gathered while I was in America – will convince

people of acudetox's attraction:

- Alcohol treatment services to the Tulalip Indians in Washington State reckoned that they had saved \$148,000 on in-patient referrals after introducing acudetox.
- Research on women receiving acupuncture at Santa Barbara County Jail showed that they were 50 per cent less likely to reoffend in the first four months after release.
- The General Motors employee drug treatment programme, after years of depressingly familiar outcome figures, introduced acudetox. Within a year, the results improved dramatically. Of the hundred employees on the acudetox programme, 83 were clean and actively employed after a year. The 17 who were still using drugs had failed to attend the programme regularly.¹²
- At the Lincoln Clinic, 40 per cent of cocaine users were testing negative for drugs every day after only a few weeks in treatment.¹³

But perhaps for me, the most convincing evidence was the 200-odd people who chose to undergo acupuncture daily at the Lincoln Hospital when there was a methadone clinic round the corner. They knew that the centre expected total abstinence, and they also knew that their commitment to treatment would be monitored regularly by urine testing. For years I have heard people say that if a prescription is not on offer, people will just not attend a drug treatment agency. Acupuncture seems to refute that premise.

The significantly improved treatment outcomes registered as a result of acudetox also suggests to me that we should stop blaming those who fail to come off drugs for a lack of commitment, and instead ask ourselves if it might be the treatment itself that is at fault.

Holistic holism

In this article I have concentrated on acudetox, but I should point out that the success recorded by the services I visited in America has been due not to just one, but to a combination of treatment modalities – what my American hosts called a 'holistic treatment approach'. This may include group therapy of various kinds; individual therapy such as massage, aromatherapy and shiatsu; relaxation and confidence-building exercises like Tai Chi, hypnotherapy and Chi Gong; and herbal remedies to relax and to overcome insomnia.

Those who were taking their treatment seriously also claimed that peer support through AA, NA or a 'sponsor/buddy' scheme was crucial to sustaining

THE BENEFITS OF ACUDETOK

In my time in America, I met with a number of acudetox practitioners. Here are a few observations made by both the providers and the recipients of treatment:

- It is just as effective with stimulants like crack and amphetamine as it is with depressants such as heroin, benzodiazepines and alcohol.
- It reduces or eliminates the pain and discomfort of withdrawing from drugs or alcohol.
- It takes away the craving for drugs, initially for up to eight hours and – as treatment progresses – for longer and longer periods.
- Unlike most prescribed drugs, there are no troublesome side- or after-effects.
- The person receiving acupuncture – when drug free – can safely drive a car, operate machinery, and get on with his or her life with a clear mind as treatment continues.
- The person attending daily for acupuncture is more likely to complete their course of treatment and get involved in other treatment options such as counselling, group work and AA/NA meetings.
- The observation that service providers love – it is cheaper than prescribing! No doctor's fee, no dispensing fee, and no drugs to pay for; only ten fine needles to be inserted daily by any properly trained member of staff. And because it is cheap and quick, people who feel the need for an occasional top-up can be easily accommodated.
- There's no need for waiting lists as large numbers can be treated. It is estimated that one person can treat up to 70 people each day. They can also be treated simultaneously. In fact, being part of a group seems to enhance the effects of the treatment.

recovery. I was also pleased to see that American agencies used, rather than ignored, relapse, seeing it as an important (though not necessary) stage in the recovery process. All too often in Britain, relapse is an immediate reason to discharge the person from treatment.

On a final note, sustained recovery seemed to be largely due to treatment going beyond the initial stages of detoxification. Unfortunately in this country, treatment usually ends when the medication is no longer required, and aftercare or throughcare are the exception rather than the rule. But it has been shown that people who are recovering from drug or alcohol misuse do not make all the permanent life changes central to sustaining recovery in the first year. In the second year, there is a higher than usual suicide rate among recovering drug addicts and alcoholics.¹⁴ All of this suggests that peer support, rehabilitation and ongoing treatment should be on offer when the detoxification process has been successfully completed. But, I hear the cry, that's very expensive – we can't afford it. Well, with the money saved, you can with acudetox. ○

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