

Piercing Through the Physical and the Emotional Pain

Acupuncture is known to heal body aches. A new study conducted by Stanford University suggests acupuncture for depression during pregnancy lessens the symptoms.

By Makiko Hultz

Seventy-nine-year-old Edna Perkins was sitting in the office of Liu's Oriental Medical Center in Omaha, Neb. on March 19, 2010. She was hoping to get herbal supplements for her knee pain caused by arthritis. She soon discovered that the treatment for her knee pain wasn't something she could take orally. Instead, tiny needles were pierced into her knees. She had been introduced to an ancient Chinese healing treatment – acupuncture.

Perkins suffered from knee pain for several years. She was scheduled to have a knee replacement surgery on March 22 but canceled it a week before.

"I had the surgery on my knees in the past but I just had a bad feeling about this one for some reason," Perkins says.

She explained her situation to her Chinese friend and she recommended Perkins go see Linda Lunt (whose Chinese name is Zhong Yang Liu) at Liu's Oriental Medical Center. Perkins' friend talked about "Chinese medicine" but she didn't mention acupuncture.

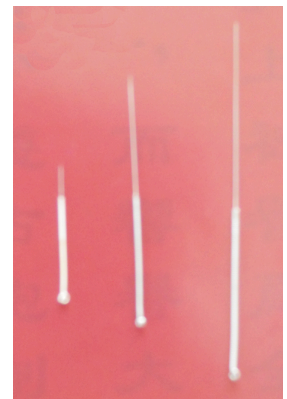
On March 19, Linda Lunt, a board certified acupuncturist told Perkins that acupuncture could ease Perkins' knee pain. It took Perkins by surprise.

"Linda told me, 'Our bodies are like cars. They need oil and grease to run well,'" Perkins says. Acupuncture was the oil for her troubled knees. "Needles didn't scare me. Besides, I hardly felt any pain."

Four days later, the day she was supposed to have her surgery, the pain was almost gone. She saw Lunt six more times.

"Sitting down and getting up used to be very difficult because of the pain," Perkins says, "but now I don't have any trouble at all."

Lunt studied Western and traditional Chinese medicine at Samra University Oriental Medicine, an Urban Acupuncture School in Los Angeles. She passed the state board certification exam and graduated in 2009. She realized the shortage of acupuncturists in the Midwest and opened Liu's Oriental Medical Center in Omaha the same year she graduated.



Acupuncture needles - Picture taken by Makiko Hultz

Nebraska has five board certified acupuncturists including Lunt but 12,101 board certified acupuncturists are located in California.

Lunt says Western medicine focuses on stopping the symptoms, but traditional Chinese medicine, including acupuncture, focuses on stopping the causes.



Linda Lunt, L.Ac - Picture taken by Makiko Hultz

“For many Americans, acupuncture is still a mystery,” Lunt says, “but when I explain what it is, they have trust in acupuncture.”

Acupuncture is a Chinese medical practice that has been used for more than 2,000 years. Chinese medical practitioners acknowledge a vital life force referred to as energy. Energy flows along pathways in the human body, which are related to the organs, the muscular systems, and the nervous system. When the balance of this energy is disturbed by trauma, poor diet,

medications, stress, hereditary conditions, environmental factors, or excessive emotional issues, it causes pain or illness. Acupuncture restores the balance by stimulating the nervous system, releasing natural painkillers and immune system cells into the body.

Lunt says benefits of acupuncture are not only for pains but also for addictions.

“Acupuncture can produce endorphins. Endorphins make people happy,” she says. “So it can help people to quit smoking, drinking or taking drugs.” But it doesn’t always have a happy ending. Lunt remembers one of her clients who was an alcoholic.

“I did everything I could but she just couldn’t stop the habit,” Lunt says. “Chemical addiction is treatable by acupuncture but the habit is untreatable. That is something patients need to work on. But together, we can stop the addiction.”

Lunt says the process for treating addiction also applies for weight loss. “Acupuncture can decrease the craving for certain foods by balancing the energy. But if eating junk food is your habit, then you need to work on that, as well.”

The benefits of acupuncture have been studied all over the world. A new study conducted by Dr. Rachel Manber, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University suggests that acupuncture can reduce depression symptoms during pregnancy.

Manber recruited 150 pregnant women with symptoms of depression, including feeling sad, insomnia, hypersomnia, fatigue, loss of appetite, increased appetite, difficulty concentrating and feeling worthless. She randomly assigned 52 participants to receive acupuncture specifically designed for depressive symptoms, 49 to regular acupuncture and 49 to Swedish massage.

Each woman received 12 sessions of 25 minutes each. Those given acupuncture did not know which type they were receiving. (In the depression-specific treatment, needles are inserted at body points that are said to correspond to symptoms like anxiety, withdrawal and apathy.)

After eight weeks, almost two-thirds of the women who had depression-specific acupuncture experienced a reduction of at least 50 percent of their symptoms, compared with just under half of the women treated with either massage or regular acupuncture.

In 2009, different study led by Dr. Najaaraq Lund, of Aarhus University in Denmark, suggests that women who take strategic serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressants during pregnancy are twice as likely to give birth prematurely as women who do not take the drugs. Many of the most popular antidepressants are SSRIs, including Prozac.

Babies born to SSRI-using mothers also appeared less healthy than other babies, based on measures including skin color, activity level after birth, pulse, breathing and response to external stimuli. Previous studies have confirmed that SSRIs can cross the placental barrier into the fetal bloodstream, and that infants born to women who used the drugs during pregnancy can suffer from withdrawal symptoms.

Manber also suggests that depression during pregnancy increases the risks for decreased appetite and poor weight gain during pregnancy, inconsolability and excessive crying of newborns, delivering infants with low birth weight, and post-partum depression.

“I decided to conduct this research because I am interested in women’s health,” Manber says, “and pregnancy is a time during which alternatives for antidepressants are particularly relevant.”



“My legs with needles”
At Liu’s Oriental Medical Center.

Manber’s study provides hope for the 14 percent of pregnant women who suffer from depression in America today.

Although Lunt hasn’t yet treated pregnant women who suffer from depression, she is eager to spread the benefits of acupuncture to the Midwest where practice of Eastern medicine is still uncommon.

“Many people still don’t know the benefits of acupuncture,” she says. “I hope to help women in those conditions (referring to Manber’s research) very soon,” Lunt says.

The challenge of her job is convincing her patients to be patient.

“Some people want to see the results right away and they give up the treatment quickly,” Lunt says. The timing of seeing the results varies for each patient’s condition. “If they can give me a chance, I can improve their condition. Once they see the results, they become a believer.”

Written by Makiko Hultz
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Information taken from Nebraska Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Association (NAOMA) website www.naoma.org, California Department of Consumer Affairs, Stanford School of Medicine website med.stanford.edu, American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology www.ajog.org.