Embedded needles

Arthur JA Wightman

The chest radiograph (see figure) illustrates the result of a form of acupuncture practised principally in Japan called okibari or maibotsushin. This differs from conventional acupuncture in that the needles are left permanently in position. They are inserted to the desired depth and then broken off at the skin surface. Several dozen needles of gold, silver or stainless steel may be inserted at one session. One hundred and thirty-five needles were counted on this radiograph.

The very rare serious complications of conventional acupuncture have been fully documented. Patients undergoing okibari are subject to additional risk from migration of needles with time. In a recently reported case, a 92 year old woman was admitted to hospital with a pneumothorax, a needle having punctured her lung 50 years after she had undergone such treatment. Computed tomography (CT) also showed needles in her liver and spleen. A second patient developed new neurological signs 13 years after she had had needles embedded in her nuchal and occipital areas. CT revealed needles that had strayed into the medulla oblongata, cerebellum and upper cervical subarachnoid space. A further case of migration into the medulla oblongata has been reported.

Embedded needles in the trunk may migrate locally to the peritoneal cavity and bladder, the kidney, and the ureter.

Because of the additional complications associated with needle migration in this form of acupuncture, the major acupuncture organisations in Japan recommended, in 1976, that its practice should be discontinued (personal communication White AR, 2000). It is not illegal, however, and is probably still undertaken in Japan, Korea and amongst South East Asian communities in North America and elsewhere. Whilst it will always be an uncommon finding, such appearances may be seen in radiographs of any part of the body, almost anywhere in the world. They are more commonly incidental findings than causative of any current symptomatology.

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Reference List


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*Figure 1. This is a chest radiograph of a man from the Far East. The needle fragments were an incidental finding.*
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