A Survey of Acupuncture Treatments in General Practice

Peter Joseph

Introduction
Acupuncture is becoming more widely accepted by the medical profession. Medical practitioners are attending training courses, such as those run by the British Medical Acupuncture Society (BMAS), and are offering acupuncture treatments to their National Health Service (NHS) patients. This paper describes the results of acupuncture treatments following the introduction of an acupuncture service in an urban general practice setting.

Methods
Following attendance at a BMAS foundation course, acupuncture treatment was offered to a range of NHS patients and was provided within normal surgery sessions (i.e. 10 minute appointments) in an urban General Practice. The patients all received their first treatment during the appointment at which they first presented. The patients were asked to re-attend for further treatments at weekly intervals.

A record was kept by the GP of the effects of treatment at each attendance. Patients were asked to score their level of improvement on a scale of zero to one hundred. An attempt was made to telephone patients who did not attend for their follow-up appointments to ascertain what response (if any) the patient had experienced.

The patients were selected both by the doctor (as being appropriate for treatment) and by the patient (i.e. in agreeing to have the treatment.)

Results
Fifty-nine patients were treated over a one-year period from November 2000 to November 2001. The conditions treated are listed in table 1. The average number of treatments per patient was 1.9 (range 1 to 6).

Fourteen percent of patients did not re-attend and were not contactable after their first treatment and hence no record of improvement or otherwise was obtained. Of those patients with follow-up information 63% experienced a significant improvement in symptoms (i.e. 50% or greater). If all the patients without follow-up information are assumed to have not experienced a significant improvement in symptoms, then the overall improvement rate is 50%.

Summary
This paper represents a retrospective survey of the effectiveness of acupuncture in an urban General Practice setting. Patients were treated within normal surgeries and records kept of treatments and outcomes. The paper reveals that when acupuncture is offered by a General Practitioner in the course of his normal working day, a significant number of patients can benefit without an excessive rise in workload.

Keywords
Acupuncture, general practice.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition or site of problem</th>
<th>No. of Patients</th>
<th>No. of Successful outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neck &amp; shoulders</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper limb excluding shoulder</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back pain</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower limb</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headaches</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-herpetic neuralgia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperemesis gravidarum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COPD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

improvement, the significant improvement rate falls to 56%. However, if all patients without follow-up data did improve significantly, the significant improvement rate increases to 70%. Six of the eight patients with no follow-up information had only one treatment.

**Discussion**

This survey indicates that acupuncture treatments on selected patients in General Practice can result in a significant improvement in symptoms in between 56 and 70 percent of patients.

Some patients who were lost to follow up may have improved, whereas others may have obtained no benefit. It is likely therefore that the true figure lies between the two figures mentioned above.

These results are similar to those reported by others. The longer-term effects of treatment in this patient group have not been assessed.

The survey also indicates that acupuncture can be offered within the setting of normal general practice since the average number of appointments was 1.9, and this included the appointment at which the patient initially attended.

Despite the fact that there are many problems in interpreting this data (e.g. the patients were selected by the doctor and by the patient themselves and there was no placebo group) the results are at least encouraging. Hopefully, good quality research will replace this data and will demonstrate more effectively the benefits of offering acupuncture to patients in General Practice.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Number (percentage) of patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No information</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No improvement</td>
<td>9 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;50% improvement</td>
<td>33 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50%-100% improvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**References list**


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