Correspondence

The Acupuncture Murders

Sir,

In view of the current emphasis on good practice and the safety of acupuncture in this Journal and throughout the acupuncture profession, I thought it would be of interest to remind readers of the existence of a little book, now unfortunately out of print, titled *The Acupuncture Murders*.

A very readable thriller, this was first published in 1973, during the wave of interest in acupuncture in the West triggered by the rapprochement between China and the US (the period of ‘ping pong diplomacy’). Its author, Dwight Steward, once a medical journal editor, ‘worked closely’ with Marc Duke, author of *Acupuncture: The Chinese art of healing* (1972). As a result, his book contains information on acupuncture that is generally accurate, sometimes intriguing, and often very pertinent to today’s practice.

The chief protagonist, stone-deaf New Yorker Sampson Trehune, is persuaded to try acupuncture for his condition. But just before he is to receive treatment, the previous ‘victim’ of the mysterious Dr Voisin is found dead, having presumably suffered a heart attack.

The first clue that a murder has been committed, rather than death occurring naturally, is that there are more acupuncture needles in the sterilising dish than when the good doctor had finished his treatment – a reminder, of course, that we should all count our needles in and out, and never leave the patient alone for too long!

It seems that someone else is attempting murder, using some forbidden points (*la piqûre morte*) to bump off people who know a little too much.

Of course, we all need to be aware that needling some points is dangerous. On the other hand, the doctor’s practice of sterilising his needles in whisky is probably something we should not emulate!

At the time the book was written, acupuncture was new to most people, mysterious, Oriental, even frightening, and certainly not recognised as part of legitimate medical practice in the US (the perfect placebo, of course). There were claims that acupuncture could help even lifelong deafness. And in this book, to enhance the aura of mystery surrounding the French doctor, the author gives him the power to read the pulses shortly after death.

Today, of course, we think we know that such things are not possible. Yet while we certainly need to know the limitations of our practice, it may be that acupuncture still holds some surprises for us. After all, a number of authors have located acupuncture points electrically on cadavers. Maybe the sensitive pulse taker, like the good dowser, can detect things that most of us cannot. Certainly, (partial) optic atrophy has been treated with acupuncture. Perhaps sensorineural deafness, if not total, may respond to some extent.

*The Acupuncture Murders* was originally published by Harper and Row in the US, and republished in 1977 by Penguin. Of course it is dated (for one thing, it is very much written from a man’s point of view, with women as trophies or mere objects of desire). Nonetheless, although in some ways a rather stereotypical story of financial intrigue, it has some nicely dramatic moments, and a suitably tangled dénouement. A rather curious coincidence is that the name of the villain in the piece is also that of a prominent American veterinary acupuncturist (in real life). Even if you a not a habitual thriller reader, it is a compelling and salutary read. Maybe Penguin could be persuaded to reissue it, now that acupuncture is once more very much in the news.

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CAM launched in a Swedish Geriatric Unit

Sir,

This year Sahlgrens University hospital in Gothenburg has launched a geriatric unit specializing in alternative/complementary medicine. Avd 606 SU/Hingbo is a normal somatic geriatric ward, working with a wide range of disease in the elderly, stroke rehabilitation not included. The unit honours the geriatric departments guidelines of evidence based medicine and patient empowerment. It does however try to widen the scope by providing massage, TENS, acupuncture and Qi Gong to patients. All members of the staff have been, and are educated to meet this end. Qi Gong exercises are due to begin this month [March 2002]. It is far too early to evaluate this novel unit yet, but one spin-off deserves mentioning – we had no trouble in enrolling a full, experienced and highly motivated crew, something which should amaze the despairing press gangs of the Swedish health services.

The Origins of Acupuncture

Sir,

The origins of acupuncture are unknown. There has been speculation that it may have developed from observation of arrow wounds received in battle, but this seems intuitively unlikely, since the trauma of the wound would probably obscure any incidental symptomatic relief of pre-existing symptoms.

Another, more plausible, idea has been put forward by Kuriyama: acupuncture may have developed from the practice of bloodletting, which was used in ancient China as well as in Europe. Kuriyama says that the method was more sophisticated than is generally realized; different sites were used for different symptoms and this, he claims, could have provided a basis for discovering specific therapeutic effects of local needling.

It has occurred to me that another scenario could be the development of acupuncture from tattooing. Tattooing has been practised in most pre-technological societies and may indeed be a near-universal human activity, going back to Neolithic times. It does not seem intuitively unlikely that it would on occasion have provided relief from pre-existing pain and that this would have led to its being specifically used for that purpose.

Unfortunately, there is no way of verifying ideas of this kind, but possible supporting evidence comes from the discovery of tattoo marks in the lumbar region on the so-called Ice Man discovered recently in the Austro-Italian Alps who died some 5200 years ago. It has been suggested that these marks were made in order to relieve back pain. If so, this would be an instance of therapeutic tattooing performed outside China at a remote era, and it would tend to favour the view that a similar practice could have arisen in China.

Reference

The acupuncture murders

David Mayor

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