Correspondence

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 608 SU/Högbo 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:1 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 origins of acupuncture

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