Use of acupuncture in the emergency department

I read the paper on acupuncture and standard emergency department (ED) care for pain and/or nausea and its impact on emergency care delivery by Zhang et al with interest. I am delighted to see that acupuncture in the ED is relatively safe and acceptable for patients with pain and/or nausea.

Unfortunately, in the UK there has been very little change in the use of acupuncture in the ED since my letter on the use of acupuncture for whiplash injury back in 2011. In fact, the likelihood of this being implemented in the ED is extremely unlikely as a recent report has shown that the NHS is spending more annually and, in view of the recent economic crisis, the Government wants it to make up to £20 billion worth of efficiency savings by the year 2015. Most NHS trusts have now cut funding on the use of acupuncture completely, including in the setting of chronic pain.

In my opinion the future of acupuncture within the NHS is poor. I have recently tried to set up acupuncture services for children with chronic pain at a tertiary paediatric hospital and for adults with chronic pain at a university hospital, but both failed despite the enthusiastic support of the pain consultants. The main resistance was the lack of acupuncturists within the NHS and the long process in setting up a clearly useful service to the population.

I thank the authors for conducting their study as it shows that acupuncture, in combination with usual medical care, has a role to play in the emergency setting.

Jason Lie

Correspondence to Dr Jason Lie, North Western Deanery, Manchester, UK; jasonlie_888@yahoo.com
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Jason Lie

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