Is acupuncture a risk factor for hepatitis C virus infection?

A recently published report in the Journal of Medical Virology on the epidemiological features of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection by Seong et al has provided interesting and important data regarding the transmission factors of HCV in South Korea. From this study, intravenous drug usage, as in the USA, was the most significant risk factor. Additionally, old age, previous needlestick injury, blood transfusion and past experience of receiving a tattoo were found to be independent risk factors. However, other invasive interventions such as acupuncture, endoscopic procedures and dental treatments, which were also explored as they have a theoretical relationship, were found to be irrelevant to HCV infection in South Korea.

As an acupuncture practitioner and researcher, we welcome the results of this study as it clears suspicion related to acupuncture treatment. Disputes over acupuncture have been ongoing since the early 1990s, but there has been no convincing evidence as to whether or not acupuncture constituted a possible risk factor for HCV infection. The result of this rigorous prospective cohort study with a large sample size assures us that it is not necessary to worry about hepatitis C due to acupuncture any more, at least in South Korea, and future patients can be reassured that there is no risk of HCV infection wherever acupuncture is practised according to safe practice guidelines with single-use disposable needles preventing bloodborne transmission of the virus.

Lastly, I would like to give the authors a small suggestion for improving the quality of reporting the results of the study. In the abstract, the primary outcomes need to be presented with estimated effect size (ORs) and precision, which was the original purpose of this study. The abstract is very important because many doctors only read the abstract for healthcare decisions. In the abstract, the authors listed the possible risk factors with the proportion of patients who had them, so from the abstract, acupuncture, endoscopy and dental care might appear to be harmful interventions even though any association was disproved statistically. In this sense, it would be better to report ORs instead of percentage of patients in the abstract.

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