

On Pins And Needles

The ancient Chinese technique of acupuncture, and wonders if it work.

In 1971, a team of American doctors were invited to Beijing to witness an amazing operation — the surgical removal of an ovarian cyst. The amazing part was that the entire operation was carried out without the aid of any form of local, epidural or general anaesthesia as we know it. A few needles were simply stuck into various parts of the patient's body and twirled at intervals to achieve such a high degree of analgesia that the lady remained not only totally conscious during the whole proceeding, but after it was over, was actually helped to sit up on the table itself without wincing.

Increasing Efficacy

At one time, sceptics used to point out that the patients selected for the surgery had both a high pain tolerance and received heavy indoctrination before the operation. It was also alleged that such demonstration cases were frequently getting morphine surreptitiously through an intravenous drip meant for fluids. Today however, similar surgeries have been repeated so many times that nobody seriously believes the sceptics any longer.

Acupuncture, as it's called, is the ancient Chinese medical technique to allegedly cure several diseases and alleviate any number of painful symptoms. Its basis rests on the assumption that the chi or life force in humans is manifested as two facets called yin and yang which flow in the body through 12 channels or meridians, all of them containing between seven to 900 skin points where stimulation such as by a silver, brass or even wooden needles of variable length may influence their relative distribution.

However, the remarkably odd fact is that the site of insertion has no relation to the area of effect in any known mechanism described in modern medicine. But the orthodox Chinese still believe that acupuncture can cure malaria, arthritis, rheumatic ailments, muteness, stomach upsets and even some forms of cancer, besides being effective against a host of other syndromes such as insomnia and chronic pain. Western science that has only recently and reluctantly recognised the validity of acupuncture agrees only with the last — namely, its painkilling properties because it has been demonstrated very often in various situations by now that it indeed works as a powerful agent against lower back, dental, muscular and myofascial pain and post-operative nausea.

Three Hypotheses

In fact, although the official Medline database compiled by the US National Library of Medicine acknowledges that researchers do not fully understand how acupuncture works, its use for certain conditions has been endorsed by the United States' National Institutes of Health. The National Health Service of the United Kingdom and the World Health Organisation have also endorsed it similarly.

So how does acupuncture work? Three hypotheses were initially proposed. They were: hypnotic suggestion, placebo effects, and endorphin stimulation. Unfortunately, statistical tests have shown quite conclusively that none of these work as well or as long as, well, needling does. The latest, in the explanation game was called intense transcutaneous hyperstimulation analgesia

which besides sounding impressive simply means that instead of inserting needles at acupuncture points, they stimulate similar areas electrically. The idea is an old one: buffering one kind of pain against the other. But recently, scientists have conclusively shown that this cannot work for, say, nausea because it has nothing to do with pain. As one researcher succinctly put it: "With the demise of that theory, we're effectively back in the Middle Ages again with only magic and mystical mumbo-jumbo to explain acupuncture!"

Give It A Try

Nevertheless, to prove a point, the next time you have a toothache for instance, take a cube of ice and rub it on the webbing between the index finger and thumb — the so-called hoku point — on the back of the hand corresponding to the side of the pain. The results can frequently be frighteningly immediate.