

Modern world embraces acupuncture

Going under the needles brings relief for some

Kara G. Morrison / The Detroit News

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Last year, Isaiah McKinnon suffered from debilitating neck and upper back pain.

The former Detroit police chief tried all the normal routes to end the agony. Pain pills didn't fix it, an MRI failed to yield answers, and exploratory surgery sounded risky.

Finally, McKinnon's longtime medical doctor suggested something that surprised him: alternative medicine. That's how McKinnon ended up under the care of Beth Kohn, an acupuncturist at the Henry Ford Center for Integrative Medicine in Northville.

The center is part of Henry Ford Health System. Its director is a medical doctor, yet the building is filled with practitioners of non-Western holistic medicines from the ancient Chinese art of acupuncture to massage and herbal therapies.

The arrangement exemplifies a national trend toward more traditional hospitals and doctors studying and even embracing acupuncture treatments.

"Of course, initially, there's some reluctance and skepticism," says McKinnon, who is lying face down on a massage table, as Kohn readies sterile acupuncture needles, glass cups and cotton swabs. "After two treatments, I said there's something right here. After three or four treatments, it was just wonderful. I'm one of those people who is sold on it."

In a room with dimmed lights, Kohn rubs a dab of oil on McKinnon's back, then starts a non-needle form of acupuncture -- cupping. The practice got national attention last year when actress Gwyneth Paltrow arrived at a movie screening with round bruises on her back from the technique, which Kohn says is used to improve circulation and extract impurities.

The room lights up as Kohn sets an alcohol-soaked cotton swab on fire and runs it through a small, round, vaselike cup. The flame, she says, removes oxygen from the cup, which is then placed on McKinnon's back, creating suction that pulls blood to the skin's surface.

Soon, Kohn starts gently tapping needles into points of the body that correspond to what Chinese medicine calls meridians, or energy paths to different organs. She uses sterile needles exponentially thinner than hypodermic ones, not much wider than a human hair. The needles are so thin they rarely cause bleeding when removed.

Kohn distributes the needles -- about 17 in all -- from the top of McKinnon's head to the heels of his feet. She's finished in a matter of minutes, and then leaves him alone in a darkened room with a heat lamp aimed at his back, letting the cups and needles do their work.

Kohn says the needles work by releasing endorphins, or natural chemicals, in the body that cause relaxation and reduce pain.

Today, acupuncture is used to ease chronic pain and nausea, to lessen the hold of drug addiction, to aid women suffering fertility problems and even to hasten healing of sports injuries for professional athletes.

Scientific studies of the practice are also receiving millions in government funding. Last year alone, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), an arm of the National Institutes of Health, awarded \$9.5 million in grants to study various uses of acupuncture and Chinese medicine.

Some of the outcomes are continuing to raise eyebrows in the medical community. In December 2004, the medical journal *Annals of Internal Medicine* published a study confirming acupuncture was effective at easing pain and improving mobility in patients suffering from knee pain caused by osteoarthritis. The study was funded by NCCAM and the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases.

In a press release about the study, Stephen Straus, a medical doctor and NCCAM director, says his agency "has been building a portfolio of basic and clinical research that is now revealing the power and promise of applying stringent research methods to ancient practices like acupuncture."

Meanwhile, the ancient Chinese practice is drawing more and more Western patients. It's estimated more than 8.2 million Americans have tried acupuncture, according to the 2002 National Health Interview Survey.

The National Institutes of Health Web site on clinical trials (www.clinicaltrials.gov) cites more than 50 current medical studies on acupuncture in North America, including dozens of studies that are still recruiting volunteers.

Among the trials: Harvard Medical School plans to study whether acupuncture is a viable treatment for patients with irritable bowel syndrome. Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York will determine whether acupuncture is an effective treatment for breast cancer patients experiencing hot flashes.

The Pain Evaluation and Treatment Institute in Pittsburg will study whether electrical acupuncture can reduce chronic back pain in elderly adults.

Still, there are hurdles to Western medicine fully embracing acupuncture, the first of which is a lack of regulation. Many practicing acupuncturists are certified by the Virginia-based National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. But without licensing, there are no legal standards for the type of training acupuncturists must complete.

Julie Silver, an acupuncturist in West Bloomfield Township and vice president of the Michigan Acupuncture Association, says Michigan is one of eight states currently not licensing acupuncturists.

Her organization hopes the governor will sign a bill this year requiring acupuncturists to be registered and establishing a board that sets training standards.

Another hurdle is medical insurance. Silver says insurance providers often cover acupuncture treatments in states such as California and Florida, but not in Michigan. Of course, licensing could also help convince health insurance companies to cover all or part of treatment costs.

And, not all scientific studies conclude acupuncture is effective. The National Institutes of Health Consensus Statement on Acupuncture concludes: "While there have been many studies of its potential usefulness, many of these studies provide equivocal results because of design, sample size and other factors."

Henry Ford Hospital is currently recruiting volunteers for their own studies on whether acupuncture has scientifically conclusive benefits. One such trial will test whether acupuncture curbs hot flashes in breast cancer patients receiving hormonal therapy.

For the participants randomly assigned to the acupuncture group, the treatments are free. But in general, acupuncture is not cheap. Treatments at the Henry Ford center cost \$100 for a 50-minute session.

Kohn, who comes from a family filled with Western medicine practitioners, is upbeat about the medical community's increasing interest in her field. She moved to Michigan more than a year ago to practice in a hospital-endorsed center.

Back at Kohn's office, McKinnon emerges from his acupuncture treatment. He's smiling. He looks lighter on his feet and a tad woozy. He's also craving water, which Kohn says is the body's way of expelling toxins.

"I can feel a release or relief," he says. "It's euphoric. You sort of float out."

Questions to ask

- Check the acupuncturist's credentials. Most states (legislation is pending in Michigan) require practitioners to be licensed. Inquire about the practitioner's training, including whether he/she is certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.
- Make sure the acupuncturist uses new, sterile needles. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration requires that only sterile, non-toxic needles be used by licensed acupuncturists. The needles cannot be reused on other patients, and must be discarded in a biohazard container.
- Do not assume acupuncture procedures will be covered by insurance. Check with your provider.
- Ask about the risks involved before undergoing treatment. While the needles are tiny, complications can occur if organs are punctured or if needles are not sterilized.

Information

- Visit the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine's Web Site at <http://nccam.nih.gov>, or call NCCAM toll-free (888) 644-6226.
- Visit the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture's Web Site at www.medicalacupuncture.org.