

Energy medicine

By JEANNE JACKSON DeVOE  
Special to The Times

Staff photos by Mark Sherman

Acupuncturist Gary Merel adjusts a patient's needles during a treatment in his office at the Khalsa Clinic in Yardley, Pa.

CAPTION:

Acupuncture needles are inserted in a patient's back during a treatment in the office of Gary Merel.

Energy medicine

The mind/body connection of acupuncture only beginning to be explored by western doctors.

Marlene lies face down while acupuncturist Gary Merel inserts a dozen tiny hairlike needles into her back.

Far from being in pain, Marlene looks like she could easily fall asleep. In fact, those tiny needles have been the keys to finally breaking the hold of a dark depression that has engulfed her for years.



Marlene was diagnosed with the liver disease hepatitis three years ago. She also has a condition called fibromyalgia which causes pain throughout her body. It made her to seek Merel's help at the Khalsa Clinic in Yardley, Pa., a few months ago. The depression surrounding her illness was so severe she couldn't get out of bed in the morning.

“Gradually, every time I come here, it seems a little better than the time before,” she says. “Someday I feel I will be able to come off my pain medication.”

The ancient Chinese method of healing not only reduces pain, it also helps patients like Marlene deal with feelings of anxiety and depression. Researchers are investigating how it might be used to treat a range of mental illnesses from drug addiction to bipolar disorder.

Preliminary studies have shown acupuncture may be as effective as psychotherapy and pharmaceuticals in treating serious depression.

“It's being talked about a lot and being requested by a lot of people, and there's been a lot of interest in it because of the cost of drugs, because of the drug side effects, because of the drug interactions and because of the failure of drugs to do the trick,” says Marshall Sager, a doctor in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., who

is president of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture. "People are looking for alternatives and acupuncture has been around for thousands of years so it has stood the test of time."

-- -- --

Acupuncture is an ancient healing method that goes back more than 2,000 years but gained attention in the United States in 1971 when New York Times reporter James Reston, who was covering President Nixon's historic China trip, wrote about how doctors in Beijing used needles to relieve his abdominal pain after surgery.

Today, Americans make more than 5 million visits per year to acupuncturists, according to a 1998 Harvard University Study.

The theory of acupuncture is that there are some 2,000 acupuncture points on the body connected by 12 main and eight secondary pathways that conduct "qi" (pronounced "chee") or energy to various organs throughout the body. Qi helps maintain a balance between the physical, spiritual, emotional and mental aspects of each person and is influenced by the opposite forces of yin and yang. Acupuncture helps restore that balance.

But the concept of meridians is a foreign one to western doctors and while acupuncture clearly works to alleviate many ills, including mental illness, it is not clear exactly how it works.

"It's not that you can't study Chinese medicine scientifically," says Rosa Schnyer, an acupuncturist who is one of the authors of a study on women and depression at the University of Arizona and is working on a larger study of acupuncture and depression. "It's just that there are some things we don't know. We don't know how it works and why it works."

-- -- --

Scientists believe that acupuncture may work by conducting electromagnetic signals, activating chemicals that reduce pain, according to the National Institutes of Health. It may also alter brain chemistry.

Sager puts it this way: "The needles are like switches in the body's software program and you're fixing a glitch in the body's software program and enhancing the body's ability to heal," he says.

Merel, who has a master's degree in Chinese medicine from the New York College for Holistic Health, says he begins each session by talking to patients. He then feels their pulse and their abdomen. He examines patients' tongues and then begins palpating or gently massaging along the meridians where he plans to insert the needles.

The needles are inserted into the skin and patients generally feel only the slightest prick as they are inserted. They remain for 20 to 25 minutes.

"I get to do two great things: I get to touch people on a deep level and participate in their doing well and I get to hear their stories," says Merel, who left his career as an account executive at a software company to become an acupuncturist. "To me it's really sacred work."

Traditional Chinese medicine emphasizes a mind/body connection that is only beginning to be explored by western doctors, explains Sager of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture. It is a hands-on treatment that is based on the patient rather than the illness, he says.

-- -- --

While acupuncture has been gaining acceptance as a way to treat pain, researchers are continuing to look into ways to use it to treat mental illnesses as well. It has been used in a detoxification program for drug addicts at Lincoln Hospital in New York since the 1970s.

A pilot study by the University of Arizona found that 70 percent of 30 women with serious depression were helped by acupuncture. The National Institute of Health has funded a larger study of how acupuncture may help depressed men and women, the results of which are expected this year.

Another study, performed by the Southwestern Medical Center in Texas and funded by a \$150,000 grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health, will show whether acupuncture works in the treatment of bipolar disorder or manic depression when patients are seriously depressed.

Schnyer, one of the authors of the depression studies, says acupuncture should not be the only treatment for patients with major depression.

But even acupuncturists who treat patients with mental illnesses warn that it must be done under a doctor's supervision.

"I won't treat them unless they're under a doctor's care and a therapist's care," says Merel.

"It's a very useful and important technique but it's not a panacea," warns Nancy Joachim, a New York psychiatrist who uses acupuncture in her practice.

Patients may be able to reduce the medicine they take for their illness but they should only do so under a doctor's supervision, she says. And while it might treat the symptoms, it won't address some of the root causes of mental illnesses. A patient with panic attacks, for example, might stop having panic attacks but may never solve what caused them to begin with.

-- -- --

Some severe mental illnesses probably cannot be treated with acupuncture, Joachim believes. Schizophrenics, for example, would not benefit from acupuncture because the treatment might be highly upsetting to them.

"In terms of severe mental illnesses like schizophrenia we have to rely on western medicine, and even the Chinese rely on western medicine," she says.

Not surprisingly, doctors who use acupuncture in their practices believe they are the best solution for patients seeking acupuncture treatment since, as Sager puts it, they can provide "the best of both worlds" by using acupuncture and western medicine. But physicians who use acupuncture may also charge more and be harder to find.

If you do seek help from an acupuncturist, choose one who is certified. States have different standards. Pennsylvania, for example, requires only 60 college credits, according to Merel, who is certified. New

Jersey requires certified acupuncturists have a bachelor's degree and two years of study at a school of acupuncture. All certified acupuncturists must pass an exam.

If you are seeking help from an acupuncturist, ask the acupuncturist to describe what the treatment will be, how many visits you will need and what the treatment will cost. Most insurance companies do not cover acupuncture.

Make sure that acupuncturists use a disposable set of needles each time and that they swab the puncture site with alcohol or other disinfectant before inserting the needle.

Schnyer recommends that patients who are depressed try acupuncture for three or four weeks before beginning medication. Acupuncture can also be used in addition to medication or when medication seems to be ineffective, she says.

Joachim believes the uses of acupuncture or "energy medicine" are just beginning to be explored.

"I think in the future we're going to know more and more about energy medicine," she says. "In 30 years we'll see a lot more people doing a lot more forms of energy medicine that we don't really think about yet."