



Stick it to Me

A trip to the acupuncturist leaves me wondering: Who's pricking me, the woman with the needles, or our modern healthcare system?

by Ingrid Cummings

I lie on my stomach, my quivering haunches exposed and nether regions needled, as my acupuncturist chats pleasantly. I must look like a large white pincushion or a cornered porcupine, what with these spines bristling out of my bare backside. She attaches electrified probes to the needles, and a buzzy vibration is transmitted to the knotted muscle that is causing my lower back to ache and pinch. All of this takes place beneath the benign gaze of a naked man who is far more exposed than I but seems infinitely more comfortable with it. Depicted in a life-sized poster in three full-color views, all 361 of this man's acupuncture points—and I mean all—are graphically labeled.

This trip to the acupuncturist is my first foray into unconventional medical treatments. I'm no prude when it comes to alternative medicine—I'm all for healthcare that integrates mind, body, and spirit. I've just been lucky enough to skate toward middle life without facing a significant medical obstacle. Lately, though, I suffer muscle spasms in my back when I sit too long, and I hold out hope that acupuncture can eradicate them.

As the healthcare crisis in this country looms, perhaps it's time that I educate myself a bit about acupuncture, an option no longer considered off the grid. According to a study published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, 51 percent of medical doctors understand the efficacy and value of acupuncture, referring patients to acupuncturists more often than any other alternative-care providers.

And so, I drop my drawers and open my mind. Out of the corner of my eye, I spy my acupuncturist reaching for a three-inch needle, and it occurs to me that she'll have to burrow through some, shall we say, inert tissue before hitting anything plausibly acupunctural. I find myself asking: How can this needle have any kind of effect on my back spasm? And, did she choose that big needle to correspond with the size of my derriere?

Acupuncture is thousands of years old, and though its exact origin is unknown, it was first referenced in a book written by Huang Ti, known as "The Yellow Emperor" of China, between 2698 and 2598 B.C. The practice arrived in the U.S. more than 150 years ago—in 1825, Dr. Franklin Bache, Benjamin Franklin's great-grandson, wrote the first U.S. medical article on the topic, "Memoirs on Acupuncture"—and it has been seeping closer to mainstream medicine ever since. In the modern era, acupuncture uses incredibly thin, disposable needles to manipulate the body's chi (pronounced chee), a nebulous concept that means life force or universal energy. The body's acupuncture points, when stimulated with a needle, trigger the brain to secrete endorphins, the feel-good chemicals said to be as effective as even morphine.

For my venture out of the mainstream, I turn to the Health Synergies complex on the far-east side, so new it crackles with the sharp edges of any recently built structure. What was formerly a "crummy" intersection at Shadeland Avenue and 21st Street is now all spruced up, thanks to Vimal Patel's ambitious brick-and-mortar undertaking and the Starbucks, Quizno's, and McDonald's that have also popped up on the corner, a convergence joining the alternative medicine with the cookie-cutter newness of chain America.

Both of Patel's new buildings sit on Rama Drive, a brand-new city street that was his to name. He chose "Rama" because it means "healing." Patel insisted that his buildings face east because the sunrise represents rising energy. Inside, a room labeled "Awareness" is used for yoga; the "Encouragement" room hosts group therapy; "Imagination" is for conferences. Most striking is "Inspiration," a two-level greenhouse-like atrium that Patel says is the heart and soul of the building, with a winding brick path and mango and banana plants.

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Patel is a retired 34-year faculty member of the pathology department at IU School of Medicine. He dislikes identifying himself as "professor," just as he now, in his entrepreneurial phase, eschews listing his two Ph.D.s on his business card. The title he's chosen for himself is "Vision Coordinator." He also dislikes the term "alternative" medicine, preferring the word "integrative," which suggests a more willing partnership with conventional medicine. "High-tech medicine can do miracles," he readily concedes. Nonetheless, I get the distinct feeling Patel parted company with the world of conventional medicine amid a bit of disillusionment. "I tried to create this kind of place at the medical center, and they pushed me out the door," he says. "They're vested in the status quo."

Patel's conversation is peppered with remarks such as "Absence of disease doesn't define health"; "Healing is an inside job"; and "Microcosmic vibrations—they're what makes me, and you you." He advocates for a holistic reckoning of each patient, including genetics, sleep patterns, hormones, immune function, nutrition, digestion, emotional state, and spiritual status. "Modern medicine evolved to take care of symptomatology," says Patel, laying a scary word on me. "It focuses on the patient's chief complaint and then searches for the name of a

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disease that will stand as the diagnosis."

Born in India, this married father of two adult children is 67. He takes no prescription drugs; the average 60-year-old, he says, takes seven. A devotee of yoga and vegetarianism, Patel certainly seems healthfully serene and stress-free. However, it's probably more accurate to say that he is handling his stress well. Much of the \$10 million Health Synergies complex is fully built-out yet vacant, intended for clinics specializing in obesity, pain, arthritis, autoimmune disease, even a "medical spa." Further ratcheting up the stakes, Patel is funding his business out of his own pocket until it becomes self-sustaining.

The acupuncture piece of the pie is robustly holding its own, however. My board-certified acupuncturist is Lei Shaw, a 34-year-old married mother of one, a Fishers resident who has been an acupuncturist for 11 years. She sees about 40 patients a week, many at their wits' end over sinus problems, arthritis, digestive disorders, menopause, thyroid irregularities, and hypertension. A session at Patel's facility costs about \$130.

One of her patients is Amanda Young, 24, of Greenfield, who has struggled with Crohn's disease, ulcers, and raging stress, plus polycystic ovary syndrome, which she says has caused her inability to get pregnant. Young submitted to surgery for Crohn's just a few months ago; it was successful but resulted in diarrhea. She is turning to acupuncture—despite her fear of needles—after traditional doctors could offer no real help. Her treatment consists of a cluster of needles inserted to a depth of just a quarter-inch on her stomach, plus a spot on her lower leg and one on the top of her head. "For my emotions," Young says. She is here, she says, as a last resort. "I'm surprised I'm here," she says. "but I'm just so desperate."

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Much to my surprise, acupuncturists do more than wield needles. Shaw has me stick out my tongue. She sees cracks, indicating dehydration and kidney trouble. Before I can express concern about getting needles stuck into my tongue, she directs me to swallow 12 tablets daily of a Chinese herb called liu wei di huang wan. Examining the jar, I see that one ingredient is tree peony root bark. Twelve tablets seems like an awful lot of tree bark.

Since we're on the subject of body parts I didn't know an acupuncturist might deal with, I mention my bunions. "Nothing I can do about that," Shaw says, "since they're a bone deformation." But when I ask about my occasional plantar fasciitis (an inflammation of the foot's fascia ligament, which stretches along the arch from the ball of the foot to the heel), Shaw tells me that feet are very sensitive to the needles, so instead she gives me several little magnetized pellets that look like BBs. They are affixed to sticky patches that are activated each time I take a step. With these metal taps on my feet, I feel like Mr. Bojangles.

I learn that ears are a hotbed of acupuncture points, including the ones associated with appetite. Sign me up for some appetite suppression! According to Chinese medicine, fat tissue represents excess dampness lodged in the skin and muscles. Dampness? This seems at odds with my purported dehydration, but I'm game. But since ears, like feet, are very sensitive, Shaw instead applies five of her sticky patches with those magnetized pellets to the insides of my ears, and instructs me to press each of them 15 to 20 times before meals or "when-ever you reach for a bad snack." With my ears now chock full of metal, if I cock my head just so, I'm able to pick up a Top 40 station in Topeka.

Next, Shaw pops needles into the back of my hand, in a spot that corresponds to headache and blood pressure. I'm a sufferer of neither malady, but this acupuncture point is also effective for general well-being. After a few more in my bum—for those back spasms, Shaw says—I'm good to go.

I leave the acupuncturist and head straight to a nearby Greek restaurant, where I promptly forget to press my abundantly magnetized ears. What chance does a tiny magnet have in the face of a feast of gyros, spanikopita, and dolmades? After all, I don't want my appetite suppressed; I want my thighs suppressed.

A couple of days later, however, I realize that my lower back is in dandy shape, although it must be said that I coincidentally resumed my yoga practice the day after the acupuncture, and yoga is wondrous for the lower back. Thus, I did not isolate the variable, making it impossible to attribute any reduction of pain to acupuncture alone. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that acupuncture "works"—the National Institutes of Health has concluded that "acupuncture may be a reasonable option for a number of clinical conditions"—even though it is not usually blessed by the system's ultimate sanction: insurance coverage.

If nothing else, acupuncture rouses competing and provocative notions of skepticism versus credibility. Young joyously credits acupuncture for a marked improvement in her numerous medical woes. All except one. As of this writing, she is not yet pregnant. Still, tunneling through her pain and sorrow are optimism, determination, and a firm belief in acupuncture's power to heal.

Of course, no one can quite explain how or why acupuncture can be successful. But as someone once said, if we all stood around waiting for things to be fully explained before we used them, we'd be watching television by candlelight. While munching tree bark.