

Iffley Acupuncture Clinic



Website Content

What is acupuncture?
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Rooted in the rich history of traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture is the practice of inserting fine needles into specific points on the body to illicit healing, combat ill health and promote harmony and internal equilibrium. It is used also as preventative medicine; to help maintain health and wellbeing and to allay the onset or development of disease.

Acupuncture is subject to well-developed protocols and undertaken only after a comprehensive evaluation of a person's overall health and functioning has been undertaken. This diagnostic process provides the basis for assigning appropriate 'treatment principles', which in turn form the foundation of a truly holistic treatment, and tailored to the specific needs of the individual. Whilst contrasting with modern Western medicine in process and understanding, acupuncture will invariably, complement rather than contradict a given conventional treatment. In some instances, it may prove so beneficial that a reduction or even cessation of conventional medication may be possible.

The same diagnostic evaluation is the product of a theoretical model that has developed over literally thousands of years of sustained observation, scrutiny and evaluation. As knowledge and understanding has been developed, appropriate adaptation of thinking and technique/s have been applied. It could therefore be argued that acupuncture, as a branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine, has perhaps one of the longest clinical trials of any system of medicine to date. It is because of this rich history that acupuncturists have developed procedures, which have empirical value in the treatment and management of a wide range of both physical and emotional conditions.



The choice of points in any given treatment and also the manner in which they are influenced, is not general or arbitrary but specific to a person's needs and the presentation of their symptoms. Treatment is both differential and empirical; whilst a group of individuals may

present with a common symptom (or disease according to western medicine), the acupuncturist's diagnosis may highlight quite contrasting pathologies and in turn, recommend and administer different treatments. Nevertheless, points may also be chosen because of their empirical value and thus patients with different pathologies might receive needles at seemingly common points in addition to receiving treatment on points specific to their circumstances

For example in the treatment of a common symptom such as headache, the acupuncturist will evaluate the overall functioning of a person and consider symptoms that in western medicine, might seem irrelevant or unimportant. In diagnosing the cause of headache, the acupuncturist will consider the precise location of the pain, its intensity, quality and duration, and also when the pain occurs and what conditions exacerbate or ameliorate it, (make it worse or better). In addition to a full medical history, they will also consider other physiological signs and symptoms and include a truly sophisticated palpation of the radial pulse. They will undertake a thorough evaluation of the tongue and in addition, observe a person's complexion and general demeanour. The acupuncturist will enquire about mental-emotional components, in recognition that a preponderance or dominance of a given emotion will not only be a significant contributory factor in a given condition, but may also reflect a specific pattern or disharmony. Rather than reducing a given condition to the smallest component, the practitioner will attempt to construct a picture of the whole. Whilst one symptom may appear identical, the person experiencing it will undoubtedly differ from another and also encounter a combination of signs and symptoms that are specific to them. This process will invariably be employed in diagnosing any condition.



Placing Acupuncture in Context:

I have stated that acupuncture is quite simply, the process of inserting fine needles at specific points in the human body to elicit a healing response. However it is when we

attempt to answer the most frequently asked question of '*how does it work?*', that we encounter difficulty. This subject is the source of ongoing debate and disagreement, not only between traditional acupuncturists and western physicians, but also within the acupuncture profession itself.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to the acceptance of acupuncture by our own medical profession is not one of efficacy but one of concept and understanding, and therefore, a failure to accept a more traditional viewpoint. When attempting to provide an acceptable description to the average Westerner on how acupuncture works, we often encounter problems of cultural difference and thinking. This in turn may lead to misinterpretation, misunderstanding and sadly, disbelief. Therefore, to enable us to understand quite how the Chinese have formulated their theories on acupuncture, we must place this system in historical and cultural context.

In ancient China, physicians did not have the biological, biochemical and neurological knowledge that that has derived from modern science. Nor therefore, did they share the conventions or employ the language and systems of measurement that we associate with it. Instead they accumulated understanding from astute observation of natural phenomena, and also studied the delicate interplay between this nature and human functioning and health. They subsequently constructed theories that enabled them to make sense of these observations; and from these they developed a set of 'conventional standards' that would be subsequently referred to, utilised or adjusted where appropriate, by countless generations of doctors throughout history. These standards were obviously quite different from our own, and whilst we frequently find simple correlations between traditional Chinese theory and observations made by modern science, any attempts to find direct parallels invariably falls short of the mark. To help us understand, we might also try to put our own thinking and knowledge base into context, and remember that our understanding of the universe is also a product of history; the foundations and conventions of which being laid down by our predecessors and philosophers of old. Whilst they are undoubtedly valuable, I suggest that they are no less truer than those constructed by other sophisticated cultures.

I believe that one of the biggest obstacles for the Western mind is that the Chinese maintain that acupuncture works through direct interaction with Qi (pronounced “chi”). To the average Westerner this immediately conjures up images of magic, energy and phenomena, which might better be left to those more interested in the weird and supernatural. This is a great shame, because an understanding of Qi and its ramifications in human health, provides us with a way of making sense of how acupuncture can be applied effectively and perhaps, (dare I say it) how it actually works. This is not to say that acupuncture does not exert a very real physiological influence, (there are countless scientific studies that prove it to do so), but that an understanding of the foundations and principles that have indeed made it effective, enable us to practice in a system that can provide empirical results. Whilst we cannot claim that traditional Chinese medical theory provides us with a truer and more real interpretation of life and living processes, we can argue that it does offer an equally viable alternative.

The Chinese character for “Qi” is constructed of two images. The first of which symbolises ‘gas’, ‘vapour’ or ‘air’, whilst the second image, that of ear of ‘rice’. Thus it might be argued that Qi is the product of the air that we breathe and the food that we eat. Indeed this would correlate with the idea that the potential for energy in the body is formulated by the interaction between the oxygen we receive from breathing and the chemicals/nutrients we gain from eating. Whilst neat, it does not really cover the whole picture. To the Chinese doctor, all that we encounter in our world is Qi, from the most ethereal or immaterial to the more solid and material. Furthermore, Qi is considered to be the universal principle that is in a continual flux, sometimes condensing to create physical form and at others, dissipating or dispersing into energy. It is this more ethereal aspect of Qi that the acupuncturist is manipulating with the needle. We might then call this ‘energy’, although it does not conform to normal western scientific conventions. Nevertheless it is interesting here to note, that our modern physicists and those exploring quantum theory are also beginning to make similar observations and share comparable theories with those of eastern origin.

How then does it work?

The Chinese view then, is that a sufficient and unhindered circulation of Qi throughout the body will serve to maintain health and wellbeing, by warming and motivating the blood and in turn physiological activity. This circulation takes place through an ordered network of channels called 'meridians'. Each of these meridians are in intimate and direct relationship with a specific internal organ and exert influence over them, either a positive or negative one. Similarly, the function of an organ will also affect the Qi in its associated meridian; and in turn the Qi in the channel will also influence both the organs and indeed any tissues that lie beneath it's path.

A breakdown of these actions occur when the Qi is either **deficient**, **obstructed** or, **rebellious** or moving in the wrong direction.

- If the Qi becomes **deficient**, then function is impaired and vitality is diminished, either in a given organ or in the person as a whole (or both).
- Whilst an **obstruction** can occur as a product of deficiency, it can also be the product of relative excess.
- Every organ and channel is said to direct its Qi in a given direction, when the Qi moves in the wrong direction, it is said to be **rebellious**.

Thus a pathology of Qi can lead to a physiological one and similarly, malfunction of an organ can also lead to a Qi pathology. The aim of the acupuncturist therefore is to readdress this imbalance; to *reinforce* when there is a deficiency or *reduce* when there is an excess, to *smooth* or *course* the Qi when obstructed and, to *subdue* or *redirect* when Qi is behaving rebelliously.

However it is important here to note that diagnosis used in Acupuncture and Traditional Chinese Medicine is far more complicated and certainly not limited to the above. This discussion serves only to give the reader a greater sense of what is actually happening during an acupuncture session or consultation.

The causes or aetiology of such imbalances are multi-factorial and include a constitutional and or biological predisposition, mental-emotional components, lifestyle,

diet and nutrition and environmental and climatic conditions, such as short or long term exposure to wind, cold, damp and heat.



The process of readdressing the imbalance, involves the insertion of acupuncture needles into specific points in the body. The points chosen will depend on both their individual or combined action, and the product therefore of their empirical value. Points may also be chosen according to the underlying pathology or location of pain.

The needles are extremely fine and made of the finest quality sterile surgical steel. The insertion is quick and painless. Once the needle has penetrated the skin, it is then moved to an appropriate depth and manipulated until a response is achieved. This response is classically known as “Deqi” which means to have ‘obtained Qi’. **Unlike the discomfort that we associate with an injection,** Deqi creates subjective sensations of heaviness, soreness and distension in the immediate location or beyond. Sometimes the acupuncturist will propagate a sensation along the course of the channel. The Deqi sensation is considered to be of extreme importance can determine the efficacy and prognosis of the treatment. Readers should not however feel concerned by this, as the same sensation can elicit feelings of calm and wellbeing. Once Deqi has been achieved, the needle is then retained for anything between 20 and 40 minutes depending on the condition. The acupuncturist may decide to undertake further manipulations of the needle, to either reinforce, reduce, subdue or smooth the Qi in the area, channel or respective organ. Please note that needles are not retained in younger children and removed soon after Deqi.



The acupuncturist may also choose to use other techniques to reinforce the efficacy of their treatment and include such procedures as Electro-acupuncture, Moxabustion, Far-Infrared therapy, Cupping and Tapping.

Electro-acupuncture is the name given to the process of needle stimulation with a mild electric current. Once needles have been inserted and Deqi obtained, they are connected via wires to battery operated electro-acupuncture stimulator. Not too dissimilar to a TENS machine, electro-acupuncture exerts a more mild and gentle stimulation of the acupuncture points. This process is in fact quite pleasant and reduces the need for some of stronger, more traditional hand stimulation methods. It is more frequently employed in acute or intractable pain and often used in reducing the pain of childbirth. In China electro-acupuncture is used in anaesthesia during surgery.

Moxabustion or moxa as is more commonly known, is the process of warming the acupuncture points, channels or areas of the body with ignited mugwort (*artemesia vulgaris*). It is most frequently used in conditions that are characterised by coldness and or, deficiencies of qi and yang. Such deficiencies impair function and this in turn may be accompanied by either subjective or objective feelings of coldness.

Generally two techniques are employed, either direct or indirect moxabustion. 'Direct' moxabustion actually involves the placing of small cones of moxa onto an acupuncture point, after which they are ignited. The cones are retained until the heat has penetrated and removed before it becomes excessive or



before burns the skin. However, some acupuncturists use a technique known as 'scarring moxabustion' that actually creates a slight burn at the point and therefore seeks to create a more long lasting influence. **These techniques are not used at the Iffley Acupuncture Clinic;** and preference is given to 'indirect' moxabustion where a point is warmed at a distance with a moxa stick or alternatively, a small piece of moxa is attached to a needle which in then conducts the heat into the point or tissue. The

latter being termed, 'warm needle' technique. When larger body areas are treated, such as in the treatment of cold related menstrual pain, then the moxa box might be employed. Moxa punk is placed on a gauze within a wooden box, the box placed over the appropriated area allowing the heat penetrate more widely. Whilst even the latter techniques might sound a little precarious, they are in fact extremely safe and most find the experience a pleasant one.

Deficiency of Qi may arise from over expenditure or in fact, through impairment derived from direct influence of cold. For example, the over consumption of raw foods and cold beverages can deplete the qi of the digestive system. This in turn may give rise to tiredness, coldness, bloating, weak and heavy limbs, and loose stools. In TCM this pattern is called Spleen Qi Deficiency. Alternatively cold may enter the body from the outside and impede the circulation of qi and blood in the channels and or their respective organs. Some forms of menstrual pain arise in this way; cold enters the channels and thence to the organs. This pattern is called 'Stagnation of Cold in the Uterus'. Moxa therefore is used to warm the channels and organs and promote circulation within them, thereby restoring function and harmony.

Far-Infrared Therapy has been a relatively recent addition to the repertoire of the acupuncturist and is by and large used as an alternative to moxabustion. Whilst the infrared radiation does not appear to exhibit they same capacity to strengthen or reinforce the qi in points or most definitely, offer the same degree of specificity, it has proved invaluable in the treatment of musculo-skeletal problems. The device which looks like a more traditional heat lamp, emits a infrared radiation within the spectrum of 2 to 50 microns. It is an extremely safe and pleasant experience.



Cupping

Cupping is so termed because it includes the use of either glass or bamboo cups in a form of Tui NA or massage. These cups are applied and attached to the surface of the body by way of a vacuum that is created either through a suction system, or more



traditionally by heating them with a flame from within. Both methods serve to drive out the air from the cups and create a subsequent vacuum. Thus when placed onto the surface of the skin, they stick to it a little like suckers or plungers. They may be placed over acupuncture points or over muscles and joints, or conversely moved along the course of a channel or muscle, either sequentially or in a sliding motion. The therapy is used to relieve what is called "stagnation" in TCM terms and is therefore used to move both Qi and blood. It can therefore be an extremely useful means of addressing muscular, skeletal and joint problems and or injuries. It can be of equally great value in the treatment of infectious and respiratory diseases such as the common cold, pneumonia, and bronchitis, where it is applied to draw out the **pathogenic factor**.