

The Use of Acupuncture in the Treatment of Drug Addiction

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Abstract: A practical approach is presented in the use of acupuncture to treat drug addiction, allowing heroin or methadone addicts to detoxify more comfortably, more quickly, and with far less narcotic intake than with the standard method of methadone detoxification. Brief case histories are presented, illustrating the various patterns of involvement with acupuncture in a drug abuse program. It was also seen that patients addicted to alcohol, barbiturates, Valium, and similar compounds have received equally effective relief with acupuncture treatments than those using narcotics.

THE Lincoln Detox Program has been using acupuncture to treat drug abuse problems for five years. We have helped several thousand patients. Acupuncture allows people addicted to heroin and methadone to detoxify more comfortably, more quickly, and with far less narcotic intake than with the standard method of methadone detoxification. Severe prolonged withdrawal symptoms of methadone addiction—such as insomnia, bone pain, and depression—are untreatable by strengthening normal physiological processes and helping the person cope with anxiety in a relaxed manner.

Acupuncture is considered a method of “natural healing,” because it works by stimulating the flow of natural energies in the body. In contrast, medications such as penicillin or methadone act by altering certain biological

cells. Often the light touch of a finger is just as effective as an acupuncture treatment than a relatively strong electrical stimulation. We cannot explain or understand acupuncture in the same way that we explain Western medical treatments. Ten milligrams of morphine have a predictable effect on the perception of pain all over the body. Stimulation of the Hoku point (Large Intestine 4) on the hand does not have the same kind of predictable effect. Differences in the balance of body energy flow will have a great effect on the results of Hoku stimulation. Acupuncture therapists can never rely on standardized treatment plans but always must discover the day-to-day changes in the patient’s energy flow.

Acupuncture is a form of self-help therapy, because the patient’s own rebalanced energy flow provides most of the health-giving relief. Acupuncture works like a momentary verbal suggestion which triggers a whole new series of ideas. Acupuncture is, nevertheless, a highly specific and effective form of medical treatment. Great confusion has been caused by the unfortunate assumption that acupuncture can be explained by the same kind of analysis that is used to explain most Western medical treatments.

Those of us who are familiar with acupuncture *and* with the drug abuse field must accept

the challenge to explain acupuncture effectively and establish it as one of the primary forms of treatment in our field. This is an extremely vital challenge because acupuncture is a safe, inexpensive and non-addicting form of treatment. The use of acupuncture could greatly reduce the need for most treatment programs to be centered around the administration of an addicting drug.

Many people have been very receptive to the establishment of acupuncture and other natural healing techniques in the drug abuse field. We receive many requests for site visits, papers on acupuncture and training sessions from people who want to use acupuncture in their drug program setting. An equal number of drug abuse specialists are intensely skeptical about acupuncture. We respect the skepticism that is due to a lack of positive concrete information. Indeed, most of us were skeptical about acupuncture when we first heard about it.

How Acupuncture Fits Into a Clinical Program

In a general paper such as this it is impossible to give the details of acupuncture treatment. However, we can explain how acupuncture can be used in a clinical drug setting, so that many of you can envision how acupuncture would contribute to your particular program.

At Lincoln Detox it took more than a year for us to build up a generally positive reputation for acupuncture among our pool of new clients. Today many patients consider trying acupuncture, but the habit of relying on narcotics leads them to choose methadone detoxification instead. We blend the two forms of treatment together so that the patients are able to take acupuncture treatments whenever they want without jeopardizing the methadone detoxification schedule that has been prescribed for them. We want the patient to choose acupuncture when he or she is ready.

Approximately 10-15 patients a month choose to detoxify from heroin addiction exclusively by means of acupuncture. These patients all do well unless they are also chronic

users of sedatives. Most of our acupuncture clients begin taking the treatments at the point during the detoxification cycle when they start to feel uncomfortable in spite of the methadone dosage. People detoxing from heroin usually begin treatments on the last two days of the 10-day cycle or immediately after its completion. People detoxing from methadone frequently feel discomfort during their entire cycle, but usually they come for acupuncture treatments when they reach 20 mg. on their detox schedule.

Most detox programs consider that detoxification treatment is completed when there is an absence of pronounced physical withdrawal symptoms. Indeed, orthodox medicine has very little to offer after this point has been reached. Even so, most of us realize that the patient is suffering with numerous complaints at this time—including anxiety, depression, insomnia, poor digestive function, liver strain, sexual lapses, etc. The fact that many illnesses “come out” during and after the detoxification cycle reflects this poor state of health. Acupuncture is uniquely capable of calming the anxiety of a detoxified addict and, at the same time, strengthening the health of his digestive, hepatic, and reproductive systems. Prescription drugs such as methadone, Valium, and Elavil, which are given to detoxing patients act solely by suppressing the perception of symptoms. The basic malfunctions in the patient's body remain undiminished and often increased. These drugs are known to have a uniformly depressant effect on the body—similar to the effect of heroin.

We have found that many of the detox patients who return to narcotics almost immediately after completing a detox cycle do so because the detoxification treatment was so inadequate that the patients never really had a chance to regain normal health. These patients continue to feel weak, depressed, and generally “sick.” These chronic generalized symptoms often compel the addict to continue to use drugs to a greater degree than the specific acute withdrawal symptoms.

Detoxification must have a preventive, health-giving component for it to be a meaning-

ful medical treatment. Acupuncture provides us with the ability to continue sensitive follow-up treatment for our detox patients. In our experience, acupuncture clients almost always become involved in productive discussions about their lives with the acupuncture staff and other sections of the program. Most of these clients had not been involved in the supportive psychological parts of our programs before their positive response to acupuncture. By taking our responsibility seriously to provide health-giving detoxification, we have been able to raise the level of achievement in all aspects of drug abuse prevention.

Actual acupuncture treatments are usually given once a day to each client. A careful history of drug involvement, past medical problems, and present physical and mental symptoms must be taken. We primarily use ear acupuncture, inserting one to four thin needles in the outside portion of each ear. Most regular patients also receive acupuncture massage and are treated with some acupuncture points on other parts of the body. Careful selection of the acupuncture points is the most important aspect of our treatments. Each day usually different points need to be stimulated for the treatment series to be successful. We use the following criteria in selecting acupuncture points: symptoms of drug withdrawal, signs and symptoms of any other medical problems, Oriental pulse diagnosis, differences in pain or pressure sensitivity in various acupuncture points, current psychological and social status of the client, visual inspection of different locations in the ear, and traditional acupuncture treatment plans. We have found that the simplified formulas for treating withdrawal with certain ear points are of limited value only. By using the formula points in every patient, temporary relief may be obtained; but prolonged improvement only occurs when the points are selected on an individual basis for each patient as we have described. In further contrast to most other acupuncture drug abuse programs, electrical stimulators are only rarely attached to the acupuncture needles in our treatment procedure.

Case Histories

Brief case histories can illustrate the various patterns of involvement with acupuncture in our drug abuse program.

C. M. has been detoxified at our program three times. On the first occasion she was obviously unwilling to detoxify from heroin: she continued to wear bent glasses that made her vision blurry in spite of our help, and she dropped out of the program before the ten day cycle was completed. On the second cycle she underwent one acupuncture treatment as if to do us a favor and she soon returned to drugs. On the third cycle she detoxed primarily with acupuncture and has been drug-free for more than a year. She returns occasionally for one or two acupuncture treatments when she is feeling jittery. She has brought her brother and another friend for acupuncture treatments, because she felt that methadone detoxification would be the wrong treatment for their relatively small habits.

T. W. heard about our program while attending a methadone maintenance program in Boston. He came for one treatment in November 1976 while he was detoxing from methadone in Boston. As a result he slept better, had less joint pains, and felt more sex drive. Three months later he came to New York for a week so that he could receive acupuncture. He had detoxified from methadone and then found himself back on heroin shortly thereafter. His body never had a chance to regain a basic level of health so that it could suppress the craving for drugs. After one treatment his sleep time increased from 4 to 10 hours. After four treatments the craving for drugs ceased.

A. F. is currently detoxing from 100 mg. methadone maintenance in our program. He has had a difficult time relating to other people and has had frequent misunderstandings in the clinic. He complains of severe insomnia and looks run down and fatigued. At 90 mg., at 50 mg. and now at 30 mg. dosage level of methadone we gave him acupuncture press needles to help him sleep. These are needles which remain in the ear several days at a time.

The patient pushes them as he needs a treatment. Each time his insomnia has improved immediately and the lack of strain has been visible on his face. He is coping somewhat better in the clinic now, but that is still a slow process. Press needles are an incomplete form of treatment, because only one point can be used easily and the point cannot be readily readjusted in view of the daily changes in energy flow and point sensitivity. Press needles have proved useful as an adjunctive treatment or as an introductory treatment in patients like A. F. who had no patience for regular acupuncture treatments.

Usually acupuncture provides relief for what would seem to be a psychosomatic symptom such as insomnia, in spite of the fact that there has been little change in the patient's overall psychological state during this initial phase of treatment. We feel that insomnia, depression, etc., are basically physical symptoms of methadone withdrawal. Their appearance or severity seems to have no relationship to the patient's willpower or emotional well-being. Many programs make the error of assuming that when a patient feels many symptoms of withdrawal that he or she is not psychologically ready to detox. Using the results of many acupuncture treatments we can clearly show that this attitude is misleading. Many patients have been counseled not to detox off methadone maintenance as a result of this misunderstanding.

There is one important limiting factor in the use of acupuncture in a drug abuse clinic. The effectiveness of acupuncture is reduced by the presence of depressant drugs in the patient's body. If the patient is actually "high," the treatment is always useless. If the patient continues to take alcohol, Valium, Elavil, or barbiturates and is not reducing the doses of those drugs, acupuncture will be much less effective. Similarly, if the patient is on methadone maintenance or on a high dose of methadone detoxification, acupuncture will be definitely less effective than a treatment for a drug-free client. Acupuncture is most effective in a "cold-turkey" withdrawal situation. How-

ever, in these days of multiple drug abuse, that situation is not very common.

The reason that depressant drugs tend to nullify the acupuncture effect should be clear at this point. The patient's body must perceive the relatively delicate acupuncture stimulus clearly and then respond with a sensitive shift in energy flow. Depressant drugs counteract this process. Many patients who receive their first acupuncture treatment at our clinic are somewhat "high" on some depressant drug at that time. They have either been returning to dope on small amounts or using drugs like Valium to stave off withdrawal pains. Most of these patients come to understand that acupuncture is an entirely different sort of treatment. They are usually able to eliminate secondary drug use in order to gain the full benefits of acupuncture and the resultant sense of increased well-being.

We must remember that most drug addicts cannot conceive of anything which will make them feel relaxed and "good" without making them "high" or sedated. Acupuncture is a truly revolutionary treatment in the drug abuse field, because its effects contradict the almost universal link between being relaxed and being high. Acupuncture brings more awareness *and* more relaxation.

Treatment of Alcohol and Sedative Abuse

People addicted to alcohol, barbiturates, Valium, and similar compounds have received just as effective relief using acupuncture as those addicted to narcotics. We have treated many patients with moderately severe alcoholism. The tremors and insomnia of withdrawal are easily controlled by daily or twice daily treatments. Craving for liquor is often remarkably reduced after one to two treatments. We are just beginning to collect statistics in this area, but we can share some examples of individual records.

G. B. was detoxing from methadone maintenance in our program. With each decrease in dosage, he began to drink more and more heavily. We told him that detoxification was

senseless if he kept drinking this way. With a lot of skepticism G. B. began taking acupuncture. After three days he looked much better. He told us he was still hanging out with drinking companions each night, but that he could hardly finish one beer. His desire for alcohol had virtually vanished. In fact, his friends began to criticize him for remaining sober and making them "look bad." We have treated several current methadone maintenance patients who were drinking heavily. In most cases drinking and craving for liquor stops after one or two regular treatments in spite of the amount of methadone the patients are taking. These patients, like G. B., were not especially well motivated. Most of them did not return for treatment after 1-2 weeks, and the majority eventually began drinking again.

These results have been surprising to us, particularly because the methadone maintenance alcoholics were treated mainly as a demonstration for their program counselor with little hope of success on our part. As in the example of G. B. above, acupuncture is able to reduce the physical component of alcoholism much more quickly than acupuncture or any mode of treatment can relieve the psychosocial component. We have demonstrated a similar effect in treating hundreds of people with heavy cigarette smoking habits. Routinely after one treatment the craving for cigarettes and the actual rate of smoking are rapidly decreased without any change in will power on the patient's part. Reductions from 3 packs a day to 5-10 cigarettes a day are not uncommon after two or three days of treatment. Withdrawal symptoms, so-called "nicotine fits," are not felt. Indeed, some patients are panicked by the sudden improvement, and they ask to have the treatment stopped so they can go back to smoking as usual.

The explanation of this phenomenon is easier to visualize in terms of cigarette smoking than in terms of drug abuse. Acupuncture improves the flow of energy to the lungs. Many patients mention that they can feel their lungs expand more fully. A person with healthy lungs is repulsed by cigarette smoking. People just starting to smoke have to increase their

amount gradually as their lungs lose the natural powers of resistance to the toxic cigarettes. Most of our detox patients experience less desire to smoke even if they are not being treated with exactly the same points as people with nicotine habits.

E. R. had been attending our out-patient therapy session for alcoholism for many months. In spite of the positive changes he had been making in self-awareness, he continued to have severe drinking bouts. After one week of acupuncture treatment his drinking stopped. Two weeks later he experienced renewed craving for alcohol which he related to certain personal problems. After two days of further acupuncture treatment, E. R. stabilized again and lost the craving he had experienced. A drinking bout had been prevented. Presently, 3 months later, E. R. is doing very well.

B. T. is a former alcoholic who is now teaching a college course in alcoholism. He began drinking heavily again. We were invited to the school to talk about acupuncture and gave B.T. a treatment without being aware that his drinking had returned. He experienced a clear relief from the urge to drink later that evening, and has not been drinking for the past six months. Acupuncture is a basic health-giving treatment. As we said before, there are no points that are just used for the purpose of drug abuse treatment. In examining B.T. we noticed certain basic imbalances in the flow of energy. These problems might or might not be related to heavy drinking. Our treatment would have been the same whether we knew about his drinking problem or not.

The Question of Proof

We have used various approaches to demonstrate that acupuncture is reliable and effective. We have charted the changes in symptoms following acupuncture for each of our patients. For patients withdrawing from heroin with no other drugs in their systems, relief of most or all of the symptoms occurs rapidly and lasts 6-24 hours. For patients withdrawing from methadone the response is less dramatic but still significantly beneficial. For example,

80% of insomniacs report an 4-5 hour increase in sleep time after daily treatments for three days. Further details from our statistical reports were given at the 1976 National Drug Abuse Conference and in the application for a research grant we submitted to NIDA earlier. (Excerpts from this report will be sent on request).

We have held many public demonstrations of acupuncture before groups in the drug abuse field. Customarily we ask anyone in the audience who has a symptom similar to drug withdrawal symptoms to come forward and receive an acupuncture treatment. Invariably the skeptics who have come forward have been satisfied. Numerous people have come to our program in the South Bronx and observed us administering acupuncture treatments. They have questioned our patients before and after treatment. These site visits have been rewarding for all parties concerned.

Often we are asked for statistical proof that acupuncture has a preventive effect on drug addiction. First of all, acupuncture is a treat-

ment for the physical and mental well-being of an individual. It cannot alter the social and economic circumstances which are important causes of drug abuse. Nevertheless, two preventive factors can be related to acupuncture: (1) A healthy person is more able to resist the temptation to escape reality by using drugs. (2) Acupuncture allows a detox program to offer adequate rehabilitative medical care, as we explained previously.

The question of statistical evidence for the preventive effects of acupuncture cannot be answered without the funds to do community follow-up studies. In our NIDA research proposal we suggested interviewing patients 6-24 months after treatment to determine their health and the rate of return to drug use. We have maintained contact with a number of former patients who have done very well; many have been hired on our staff or have been successful elsewhere. But without extensive research funding which very few programs receive, we cannot offer statistical evidence that acupuncture has a preventive effect.