

## **Acupuncture: the I of the Needle**

by Dr. Gary Piscopo, N.D., LAc

Although more people are becoming aware of the benefits of acupuncture, for many it still remains a rather exotic and somewhat dangerous sounding therapy. The idea of having needles stuck in one's body conjures up some rather unpleasant images. Hopefully, this article will help to dispel some of the more common misperceptions about acupuncture.

### ***What is acupuncture?***

Acupuncture is actually part of a larger system of medicine known as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Just like surgery is a only one part of conventional medicine, so acupuncture is single piece or modality within TCM. Acupuncture involves the insertion of very fine, sterile needles into special areas of the body in order to affect the flow of qi. Qi, which is similar to the naturopathic concept of *vis medicatrix naturae*, can be generally thought of as the "life force" or "natural healing energy" of the body.

### ***How does acupuncture work?***

Like many things in medicine, the definitive physiological explanation for how acupuncture works from a Western scientific perspective is not known. There are many theories, including the release of brain chemicals or a change in the body's ion flow, but much more research needs to be done. A very simplified translation of the traditional Chinese explanation is that pain and disease within an individual is caused by the restricted movement of vital nutrients, such as qi, blood, and moisture. Acupuncture assists in correcting this pathological situation and bringing the body and mind back into balance.

### ***Does acupuncture hurt?***

For those of you who have images of being stuck with multiple hypodermic needles, the sensation of an acupuncture treatment is nothing like this. Unlike hypodermic needles, which are large bore, hollow needles with a cutting edge, acupuncture needles are solid and have a sharp, pointed end. As to their diameter, generally 10 to 12 acupuncture needles can fit inside one ordinary hypodermic needle. This does not mean the treatment is pain free, but generally there is only a slight stinging sensation as the needle is inserted into the skin.

### ***Is acupuncture safer and more effective than conventional medicine?***

Like any medical procedure, acupuncture has both side effects and variability in its effectiveness. Being more "natural" does not change this fact. Acupuncture is not a magic wand that can, of its own, reverse years of negative lifestyle choices such as poor diet, smoking, or lack of exercise. Similarly, acupuncture is not indicated for all conditions. Finally, in the hands of an untrained or inexperienced individual, acupuncture can result in grave medical complications.

### ***How do I find a good acupuncturist?***

Like any medical practitioner, an acupuncturist should be properly credentialed. Acupuncturists are certified by the NCCAOM (703-548-9004) and licensed by the state Department of Health. Unfortunately, other medical practitioners ( i.e. M.D.s, chiropractors, etc.) can practice acupuncture after as little as 200 hours of training, so be sure to ask if the person you are considering also has at least a master's degree in acupuncture from an accredited institution.

Gary Piscopo N.D., L.Ac., is a naturopathic physician and licensed acupuncturist. After twelve years in conventional, hospital-based medicine, Dr. Piscopo decided to pursue a career in natural medicine and is a graduate of Bastyr University. He also serves as a consultant to MicroMedex, Inc., which provides databases on various topics to other medical professionals, such as medical doctors and pharmacists. Dr. Piscopo has a private practice located in Wenatchee, WA. he can be reached at (509) 775-0967.