

Patients often find it difficult to explain acupuncture to their friends. This column shares ways of talking about treatment. In each issue of *Meridians*, a patient or practitioner tells how he or she explains acupuncture to someone new to this form of health care.



BY
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Talking About Acupuncture

After people diagnosed with lupus reported surprising experiences with acupuncture treatment, the newsletter Lupus Update invited their practitioner, Clayton Spivey, to write about lupus and acupuncture. In that article, reprinted below, she explains how acupuncture works to enhance well-being whether the label placed on the patient's condition is "lupus," "colitis," or simply "fatigue."

Acupuncture and Lupus

I want to start this article by telling you that acupuncturists don't treat lupus. We treat people. That may sound like word-play, but I think the distinction is important. Let me explain.

By the time many people are diagnosed with the condition called lupus, they probably have been the rounds of medical doctors who evaluated them based on their symptoms. Their family doctor sent them to the internist who in turn sent them to the neurologist, the endocrinologist, and finally the rheumatologist (and maybe they saw the psychiatrist on the way).

The biggest difference between Western medicine and Eastern medicine is that in Eastern medicine, you are more than the sum of your parts, and all of you—your body, mind, and spirit—can be tended in the same office. You are more than lupus or any other disease. You are a whole person whose life has been disrupted by a condition (lupus, in this case) that has made it hard to play with your kids, be out of doors on a summer day, go on a hike, or even sit in the theater. To an acupuncturist, your life is not equated with a disease process. Your health is not calculated by the numbers on your most recent blood test. Your health is how you feel and how

you are able to function in all of your life's activities.

I say these things because acupuncture will not "cure" lupus, or any other chronic disease. What acupuncture does is to help you live your life as comfortably, fully, and eagerly as you can. That means that acupuncture may help you cope with the disease process better—it may reduce fatigue levels, ease joint pain, and address the depression that often goes with a chronic disease. It may help with the side effects of medication, or it may enable you to reduce the amount of medication you take (with the guidance of your physician, of course). Acupuncture is a medicine that deals with the quality of life of people who are in the process of living. (Note that "symptoms" are not only physical. Many people seek assistance who are wrestling with depression, anger, fear, grieving, poor sleep, etc. Acupuncturists make little distinction between concerns of the body, mind, and spirit.)

Throughout history, acupuncture has been used as a preventive tool. It was used to keep people healthy and to keep chronic difficulties from getting worse. Lupus, for example, is only a symptom of an imbalance in one's system. Symptoms, you see, are only the tip of the iceberg. Like the oil light in your car, the symptom points the way to a deep imbalance. If you simply reach under the dash to turn off the light (treating the symptom), you're likely to have severe problems down the road.

I'm often asked how acupuncture works. The acupuncturist is trained to assess where the channels of energy are blocked and to open them; then the energy flows more freely and smoothly in order to support the body's normal complex processes. While we have discovered that these channels—the meridian pathways of acupuncture—correspond somewhat with the nervous

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system, exactly how acupuncture works is still a mystery to Western scientists. It was only about 20 years ago that science discovered how aspirin worked. Not knowing, however, never kept people from using it (or doctors from recommending it) to make them feel better.

Acupuncture seeks to “retrain” your energy into health. As in any training program, the goal is to “coach” more often in the beginning, until the new ways are learned, then gradually let the energy maintain itself. While each individual is unique, and a treatment plan is designed specifically for each patient’s needs, most people come for weekly treatments for about six to ten weeks, then every other week, then every three weeks, etc. Many patients then choose to have treatments just often enough to help maintain the balance that has been achieved. (I encourage people to do this for their bodies, similar to what they do for their cars without question. Several of my patients with lupus come for a treatment every eight to twelve weeks.)

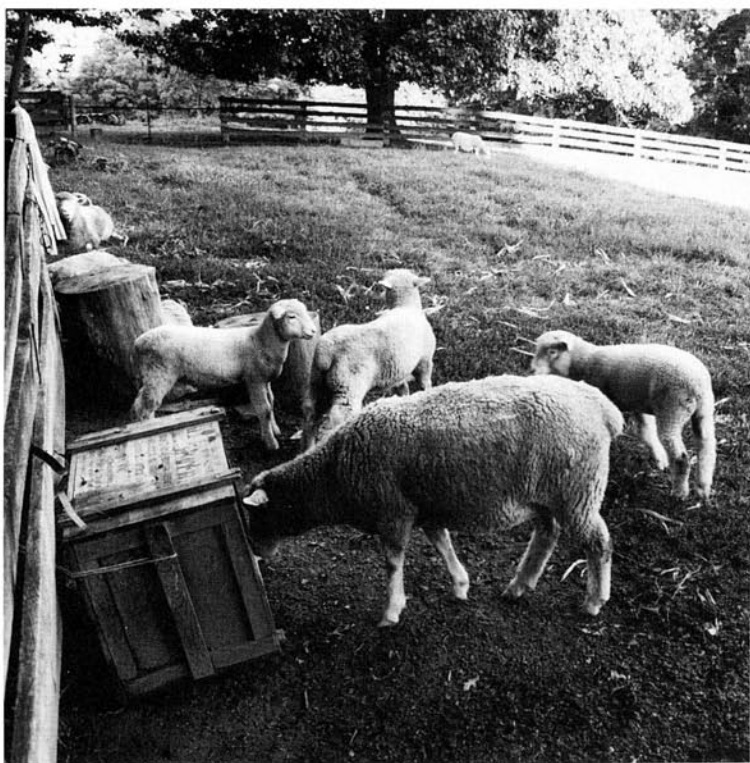


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Many people ask about the needles we use. Needles are approximately the thickness of a human hair and rarely longer than one inch. They are solid, not hollow, so nothing gets injected or withdrawn. They are made of stainless steel and are sterile and disposable; they are discarded after each use. Most acupuncturists never, ever, reuse needles from patient to patient; so contamination is not possible. Check with your acupuncturist to be sure she is among the vast majority using only disposable needles.

In any given acupuncture treatment, I usually needle only two or three points. (The images in the popular press of people looking like they have been attacked by porcupines make for a good magazine picture. In fact, acupuncturists rarely use so many needles.) Most people feel a tingling or an ache when a needle is inserted, but any discomfort is momentary.

Acupuncture is a natural form of healing and is, therefore, slower and more gentle than drugs or surgery. A compensation for the slowness, if you need one, is that rarely are there any side effects!

Choosing an acupuncturist

In choosing an acupuncturist, keep several things in mind. First, check the professional qualifications of your acupuncturist. In Maryland, for example, the Maryland State Board of Acupuncture licenses all acupuncturists, and you should be sure your acupuncturist has met the qualifications for licensing. A professional acupuncturist will have graduated from a rigorous accredited training program (two to three years long). Most licensed acupuncturists in Maryland have studied at the graduate level for several years at schools that are accredited by the National Accreditation Commission for Schools and Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine and that are recognized by the U. S. Department of Education.

Be aware, however, that professionals calling themselves “medical acupuncturists” may not have completed such a rigorous program of acupuncture training; persons in this category must complete only a 100-hour course in order to use



Photo by Giovanni Pescetto

needles. So be sure to ask the person you plan to work with about the extent of his or her training in acupuncture.

Aside from professional qualifications, you should feel comfortable with your acupuncturist. If your questions are not answered and your concerns not satisfied, interview another acupuncturist—don't just say that acupuncture is not for you. And a word of warning: If you hear an acupuncturist promising "cures," run the other way as fast as you can. No responsible medical professional promises cures.

To get a referral to an acupuncturist near you, call the Traditional Acupuncture Institute in Columbia, Maryland (410/997-4888 or 301/596-6006), or the National Commission for the Certification of Acupuncturists in Washington, D.C. (202/232-1404).

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For information about Lupus Update, published by the Maryland Lupus Foundation, call (410) 337-9000 or write to 7400 York Road, Baltimore, MD 21204-7531.

Thanks to Mary Guidara, editor of Lupus Update, and to Jeri L. Falk, executive director of the Maryland Lupus Foundation, for their assistance with this article.