Acupuncture as a Complementary Alternative Therapy

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Abstract

Multiple forms of complementary alternative medicine treatments are used throughout the United States. This paper will discuss acupuncture as one form of treatment directed at pain management. As needles are placed into the skin one is forced to question if this is a true pain management therapy, or if the power of suggestion is enough to provide pain relief in patients. Acupuncture has been used for centuries to improve many chronic conditions including back pain and migraine headaches. This therapy is considered new in the United States and education will help analyze the risks versus benefits to this alternative medical therapy. Researchers are still learning how the principles of acupuncture work as patients are requesting this type of treatment for pain relief more frequently. Researchers have compared acupuncture to the placebo response with other therapy and have seen similar results. Although acupuncture may work for patients through the placebo effect, pain management is the ultimate goal. As research continues, acupuncture methods will be able to be explained more thoroughly to allow better patient education. Complementary alternative medicine treatments with acupuncture will be analyzed and researched for years until the true mechanism of action is discovered.

Keywords: acupuncture, chronic pain management, placebo effect
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**Complementary Alternative Medicine**

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) are not considered part of conventional medicine, instead they are treatments used to enhance the individuals response to management of their health care goals. Acupuncture is one of many treatments that fall into this broad category. CAM is considered important as Americans seek additional methods to reduce and relieve chronic pain conditions such as back pain, and migraines (Tan, Craine, Bair, Garcia, Giordano, Jensen, & Tsao, 2007). The American culture is ready to explore alternative treatments that do not require daily medications and possible prolonged side effects. As we seek out CAM treatments we will expect that our healthcare providers offer guidance in our quest for enhanced health.

**Health Definition**

The definition of health has changed from one of not being ill, to a more complex definition that includes areas such as strength, resilience, spiritual, emotional, and mental health. Healthcare professionals must use this knowledge to incorporate all aspects into individual care. Acupuncture is a new experience to many individuals and increased education must be provided to community members along with medical personnel. The mindset of the healthcare professional needs to change as we move toward a holistic care experience instead of fragmented care (Pender, Murdaugh, & Parsons, 2011). It is necessary as health care providers to recognize the needs of the community that we serve. The provider should not limit the choices of the patient; they should set goals and encourage opportunities to succeed.
History

Acupuncture is an ancient health care practice that can be traced back nearly 2500 years. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) involves treating the whole person, not just individual parts. TCM believes that different patterns of energy flow throughout the body. The energy known as Qi, must remain open to insure balance in the body. In order to stay healthy the two poles, Yin and Yang, must remain equal. Yin represents the cold, slow, or passive state and Yang represents the hot, excited or active state (Samuels, Gropp, Singer, & Oberbaum, 2008).

TCM believes that there are twelve main meridians and eight secondary meridians which contain over 2000 acupuncture points. Each meridian is associated with a different organ system. Thin needles are inserted into the skin at various points to stimulate specific muscles, connective tissue, and nerves (Samuels et al., 2008). The goal of the body is to stay balanced; therefore, in a diseased state the two forces are unbalanced and this will lead to blockages in the flow of Qi.

Considerations

The holistic view of healthcare provides the foundation necessary to establish common goals and outcomes that will best serve the individual client. Acupuncture as a CAM therapy must be evaluated using realistic goals and measurements. As treatment plans are developed it is necessary to consider that TCM is based on syndromes and not on specific diseases. As such, we must educate both the physicians and the patients to enhance results (Tan et al., 2007). As the popularity of acupuncture has increased, its integration into modern healthcare service has also increased. Teams of medical personnel and community members must work together to improve acceptance of acupuncture as an alternative choice for healthcare.
Models

Theory and conceptual models are the basis for CAM such as acupuncture therapy. The conceptual theories have changed people's perception of treatment options. Tee and Dawood (2010) state, "The effectiveness of acupuncture in specific clinical conditions has, however, only recently been considered – it is essential that scientific investigations into acupuncture continue in the effort to unearth new discoveries about the mechanism by which acupuncture exerts its effects on the human body."

The patient's perception of pain is a personal feeling. The methods of the gate control theory (GCT) help to explain the mechanisms in which acupuncture reduces pain. The study of acupuncture, regarding the reason it reduces pain, still must be studied to maintain validity of this alternative therapy. The GCT provides the framework for acupuncture pain relief, however it is likely that acupuncture is a multi-modality occurrence and that other bodily processes are also involved (Tee & Dawood, 2010). Even though acupuncture was introduced into Europe in the early 17th century, the treatment advantages and disadvantages must be analyzed to provide quality pain management for the patients who choose acupuncture.

Effectiveness

Acupuncture has been studied for decades to gather enough data to state that the treatment is beneficial. According to Maria E. Suarez-Almazor M.D., Ph.D., of the University of Texas (2010), since patients in actual and fake acupuncture groups reported similar improvement; the conclusions showed a placebo effect related to the acupuncturist's communication style that may have affected patients' perceived benefits of acupuncture. Even if patients are experiencing symptomatic pain relief due to a placebo effect, it is still useful to continue these practices. Patients who have been fighting chronic pain for years related to
arthritis are usually willing to try anything for symptom relief. Acupuncture is necessary to try for patients who struggle for pain relief. If studies draw the wrong conclusions from evidence, health care facilities may begin integrating acupuncture into their guidelines, and eventually involve it in the routine treatment of chronic pain. If acupuncture is implemented into routine practice, the effects will be reduced through time. Currently, patients who have not been able to find symptom relief from chronic pain due to arthritis, migraine headache, and other chronic pain conditions have found success with acupuncture (Suarez-Almazor, Looney, & Liu, 2010).

Since acupuncture is relatively new to the United States health care system, the current state of understanding acknowledges that placebo factors are powerful and undoubtedly play an important role in pain relief. The effects of acupuncture are difficult to determine due to the unique characteristics of each patient's chronic unresolved pain issues. Although the mechanism of action of acupuncture is difficult to interpret, patients who have chronic pain have seen relief through this CAM, which allows for further research and analysis. Witt, Jena, and Brinhaus (2006) completed a study regarding patients with chronic neck pain. They compared 1880 patients with chronic neck pain who received acupuncture with an equal number of controls. Witt et al. (2006) stated, "Those who received acupuncture and routine care had statistically significant improvements in both pain and disability status at the 3-month follow-up as compared with those in the control group who received only routine care." This study improves the validity of acupuncture and shows gains in improved pain therapy through CAM therapy. Dr. Noah Samuels from The Center for Integrative Complementary Medicine at the Shaare Zedek Medical Center, stated that, "Such studies would allow mental health professionals to consider acupuncture a complementary treatment with the potential to augment current therapy and increase the frequency of positive outcomes without increasing the risk for potentially harmful
effects” (Samuels et al., 2008). This study shows the benefits of acupuncture to treat patients with psychiatric illnesses. Recently, patients diagnosed with psychiatric problems are increasing and the methods of alternative medical therapy such as acupuncture has been considered a reliable treatment for these patients.

**Implications and Consequences**

Since acupuncture is a CAM, there are many risks and benefits. The ultimate goal of health care to ensure treatment for patients that support more positive benefits compared to the negative risks. The major risk factors of acupuncture can involve, serious adverse events including spinal cord injuries, tension pneumothorax, cardiac tamponade, and hepatitis. However, studies have proven an incidence of mild, transient acupuncture-related adverse events that range from 6.71% to 15% (Zhang, Shang, Gao, & Ernst, 2010). This is a relatively minimal percentage of adverse events related to acupuncture. Other adverse effects included shock, cardiac arrest, fever, cough, thirst, sexual dysfunction, leg numbness and cough. However, the existence of a direct link between acupuncture and these adverse events is uncertain in the conclusions of such studies (Zhang et al., 2010).

**Community**

The community may seek acupuncture treatment despite the numerous, but rare adverse effects due to the benefits of CAM supported through research analysis. Many community members who have resorted to acupuncture have not felt pain relief through other interventions. Acupuncture can benefit those patients seeking pain relief by limiting the usage of narcotics and decreasing disability shifts related to severe pain. These CAM therapies complement other treatments and allow safe and effective alternative pain management methods. Due to recent research and analysis regarding acupuncture, it has been proven to be a safe alternative medical
therapy despite the risk factors. The benefits of acupuncture are currently outweighing the risks when analyzing the perspectives of theorists and researchers around the globe.
References


