

Pins & needles

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Acupuncture, that ancient **Chinese** therapy, is finding new popularity among the Western ailing and even gaining acceptance from the medical fraternity.

For Melbourne rock'n'roll drummer Bobby Johnson, a regular **acupuncture** session ensures he maintains the rhythm of life. The fortnightly treatments have cured his indigestion, bronchitis, stress and lethargy. "Everything," says the 59-year-old, "feels better after **acupuncture**."

Johnson is one of about 3 million Australians a year who have their meridians artfully tweaked via a needle or 10. The popularity of **acupuncture** - which is used to treat a plethora of ills ranging from hiccups to depression - has spiked in the past decade, with the number of Australian practitioners almost doubling. The Australian **Acupuncture** and **Chinese Medicine** Association (AACMA) estimates that 1700 to 1800 primary or "non-medical" acupuncturists operate throughout Australia. Add to that the roughly 2500 doctors who incorporate **acupuncture** into their medical practices and it seems we have become a nation of complementary **medicine** converts.

"It's grown phenomenally," says AACMA chief executive officer Judy James. "People used to try **acupuncture** when all else failed but now we're finding people are coming to **acupuncture** as their first port of call. It doesn't surprise me that it's become as accepted as it has because it works."

How **acupuncture** works is becoming less of a mystery as Western **medicine** and science open up to the validity of a treatment that's been administered in China for more than 2000 years. This ancient practice operates on the principle of "qi" (pronounced "chee"), the "life energy" within all of us. Devotees believe qi flows through meridians (a network of invisible channels throughout our bodies) and maintains the harmony, balance and order of our systems. Practitioners say that when qi is blocked by an injury or a deficiency in the flow of energy in the meridians, we succumb to illness and disease.

Acupuncture is not for the faint-hearted - sterile fine needles are inserted into one of 300 specific points on the body (there are forbidden areas on the chest, face and genitals) to clear energy blockages and restore the flow of qi. Needles remain in place for 15 to 30 minutes and are occasionally twisted or tapped by the acupuncturist to stimulate energy flow. The insertion of the needles is not painful to most people but the area around the needle can sometimes produce a mild ache or pulling sensation.

Our **acupuncture** points can also be stimulated by laser and electro-**acupuncture** and the more ancient methods of **cupping** and moxibustion. **Cupping** is the technique of applying suction over selected points of the body - a vacuum is created by warming the air inside a glass or bamboo cup and overturning it onto the body to disperse areas of congestion. Moxibustion, on the other hand, is the burning of a cigar-like roll of the herb *Artemisia vulgaris* (mugwort) held close to the skin near the **acupuncture** points.

Sound like hocus-pocus? Perhaps. But for a staggering number of Australians, it's working. "In the 1970s, it was described as voodoo," says Professor Alan Bensoussan, director of the Centre for Complementary **Medicine** Research at the University of Western Sydney. "But as we learn more about how it works, there's a recognition of the validity of the practice. Through controlled clinical studies, we now have enough evidence that it creates a whole lot of neurophysiological changes. We know that neuro hormones in the brain, spinal cord and bloodstream [such as adrenaline] are affected."

High-profile devotees of **acupuncture** have sharpened our interest even further. Swimmer Grant Hackett added **cupping** to his pre-Athens preparations and Madonna and Prince Charles have both been stuck. US golfer Fred Couples attributes his champion swing to **acupuncture**. Cher swears by **acupuncture** facelifts. Hailed as a hot alternative to Botox, needles are inserted directly into wrinkles and facial muscles to stimulate blood flow and collagen regeneration.

But beyond elite athletes and celebrities, it's everyday people with everyday complaints who are seeking the magic needles. Strategically placed needles can dilute and even eliminate the pain associated with migraine, neck and backache, arthritis and sports injuries. Respiratory and digestive conditions can respond to **acupuncture** and issues relating to gynaecology and fertility are among the fastest-growing areas in **acupuncture** consultation.

Bensoussan and his team at UWS started teaching **acupuncture** as part of a four-year degree course in traditional **Chinese medicine** in 1999. It is one of a number of Australian universities (including University of Technology Sydney, RMIT University and Victoria University of Technology) offering accredited degrees that include **acupuncture**.

Since Medicare scheduled **acupuncture** as a rebate in 1991, demand for qualified practitioners has mushroomed. Dr Vicki Kotsirilos, a Melbourne GP, began offering **acupuncture** in 1991 and today treats more than one-third of the patients at her Clayton practice with both traditional and laser **acupuncture**. "Medical **acupuncture** integrates well for doctors," Kotsirilos says. "Instead of

using pharmaceutical **medicine**, I can offer **acupuncture** as an alternative."

Kotsirilos "pins" about 20 of her 60 patients a week to treat everything from nausea and PMS to cigarette addiction. After an initial one-hour consultation, each session lasts for about 15 minutes to half an hour. (The cost of an **acupuncture** session with a GP is about \$50, of which \$26.25 is refunded on Medicare. Most private health insurers also cover **acupuncture**.)

As a non-medical **acupuncture** practitioner, Hoc Ku Huynh has been applying his traditional techniques for 28 years. "When I first started practising **acupuncture** in Sydney in 1976, nobody knew what it was," he says. Today, Huynh has tens of thousands of patients on file. In his small practice in Sydney's Chinatown he sees an average of 100 patients a week and business is booming. "In the past 10 years, there has been a 300 to 400 per cent growth in popularity. I'm getting a lot of referrals from GPs and other medical practitioners now."

After spending every winter from the age of 14 swallowing antibiotics to treat chronic bronchitis, Bobby Johnson was looking for a natural alternative. He discovered **acupuncture** in 1998. Not only did it treat and prevent his bronchial condition but it has also helped with his drumming. "I was having trouble with my forearms," he recalls. "They were stiff and tight. I was a pretty hard player. The **acupuncture** loosened up that tension and it was easier to play."

Johnson says he hasn't taken antibiotics for six winters and that his fortnightly **acupuncture** treatments have put a spring in his step. "All I know is that after I've had it, I feel all-over good," he says. "I'm fit and energetic and I don't have to take tablets."

Johnson's reasons for opting for **acupuncture** are common, says Bensoussan. "It might seem an unnatural process but people now see it as a way to stimulate the body's own responses to manage disease and dysfunction. It's drug-free. People view it as a natural form of intervention."

Side effects are minimal and rare. Accredited practitioners are required to use disposable, single-use needles to minimise the incidence of infection. Still, about 0.4 per cent of patients may experience nausea, dizziness, fainting, headaches or localised infection after treatment. Kotsirilos says she treads lightly until she gets to know the patient's threshold. "It doesn't suit everybody," she says. "Some people are very sensitive to it."

On the flip side, Kotsirilos adds, "I've been able to treat so many conditions. I've been able to offer cancer patients relief with pain and nausea. It's very effective in palliative care. I use laser **acupuncture** on children with things like asthma and eczema and they respond really well. We need more research."

For Hoc Ku Huynh, research relies not so much on scientific studies but rather on his own intuition. "**Acupuncture** is an art. It also requires some instinct. In traditional **acupuncture**, we learn with our fingers. It's the way we've been doing it for 2000 years."