

# Needles for healing

1 Aug 2006 West Australian

**Acupuncture is one of the most popular complementary therapies in the Western world and also is one of the most researched. Wendy Pryer takes a look.**

Unlike most Western medicine, which focuses on treating symptoms and disease, the key principle of traditional Chinese medicine is to nurture the body's own healing powers and to prevent disease.

**Marie Hopkinson**, a TCM practitioner based at Metro Health and Medicine in Maylands, has just completed a thesis at Curtin University on Chinese medicine and the ancient treatment of acupuncture.

While acupuncture had been used for centuries to treat many conditions, Miss Hopkinson said modern research was confirming its importance.

In TCM, practitioners looked for patterns of disharmony rather than disease. Unlike medical acupuncture performed by GPs, treatment of back pain is likely to involve inserting needles in the other parts of the body, such as the hands and feet, rather than just at the painful site.

Miss Hopkinson said acupuncture did not involve the sharp, stabbing pain that people associated with hypodermic needles because the needles were designed to push blood vessels to one side, rather than cut through them.

Miss Hopkinson's study, which cannot be released until it is officially published, compared the 10 most common conditions treated with acupuncture by TCM practitioners in Perth with their counterparts in the Chinese sister city of Hangzhou.

She said her study revealed that infertility and muscular skeletal problems were the two most common conditions treated by Perth practitioners. In China, muscular skeletal problems were at the top of the list but not infertility.

Treatment of cardiovascular disease was much more common in China than in Perth. In China, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners work with Western medical doctors in hospitals, and heart disease and stroke are two conditions commonly treated.

Miss Hopkinson also found that lifestyle conditions, such as anxiety and depression, were more commonly seen by Perth practitioners than those in China.

Her findings coincide with the release of a major Australian study by Adelaide University researchers recently which found acupuncture is effective for infertility.

Caroline Smith, who conducted the first single blind and controlled randomised acupuncture trial in the university's fertility clinic, Repromed, said the study showed that women who had had acupuncture had a higher chance of becoming pregnant during embryo transfer (or in-vitro fertilisation) than those who did not.

When her study of 228 women was combined with the findings from three other trials (involving a total of just under 800 women), the results showed a pregnancy was twice as likely to occur in the acupuncture group compared with the control group.

Dr Smith also has published research indicating that acupuncture may help in the treatment of morning sickness. That study, published in the journal, *Birth*, looked at 593 women in an Adelaide maternity hospital who were less than 14 weeks pregnant with symptoms of nausea or vomiting.

Women receiving traditional acupuncture reported less nausea throughout the trial and less dry retching from the second week of pregnancy compared with women in the no acupuncture control group but women in the sham acupuncture group (where placebo acupuncture needles were used) also reported less nausea than the no acupuncture group.

Chinese medicine practitioner **Wade James**, of Chinawest in Fremantle, said at least 40 conditions might benefit from acupuncture, ranging from digestive, respiratory, emotional, gynaecological, neurological, musculoskeletal and eye, ear and throat problems.

He said recent German research also had shown acupuncture was an effective method of treating infertility and research just out of America had highlighted its usefulness in arthritic conditions.

## RESEARCH SAYS ACUPUNCTURE EFFECTIVELY TREATS:

**Infertility-** Acupuncture doubles the likelihood of successful embryo transfer via IVF.

**Morning Sickness-** May reduce likelihood of nausea and dry retching.

**Heart disease-** University of California research shows acupuncture can improve the prospects of people with severe heart failure by reducing activity in the sympathetic nervous system (which regulates involuntary movements such as heart and blood pressure).

**Osteoarthritis-** A review of several trials showed acupuncture was more effective than sham acupuncture in controlling pain but was no different from usual treatments in improving function.

**Childbirth-** A study of more than 3000 mothers in labour found acupuncture reduced the use of other methods of labour analgesia (pain relief) with no major side effects in mothers and infants.

**Migraine-** German research published in the Journal of Internal Medicine shows acupuncture and the migraine medication sumatriptan were more effective than a placebo injection in the early treatment of an acute migraine. But when an attack could not be prevented, sumatriptan was more effective than acupuncture at relieving headache.