

Five Reasons to Consider Acupuncture

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In recent years, Oriental medicine has been growing in popularity, forcing many in the Western medical community to sit up and take notice. Fifteen years ago, if you asked your primary care physician about acupuncture, he or she might have laughed you out of their office. Today, their responses have changed to something more accepting. While most will readily admit they don't understand this ancient practice, there is a growing body of research that indicates it works for many conditions.

How Does Acupuncture Work?

The practice of acupuncture originated thousands of years ago in China with the use of stones. It operates on the theory that energy, known as "chi" in the East -- similar to bio-electricity in the West -- must flow freely in the body. If there is a blockage, organs will not receive enough energy to function properly, leading to disease. Acupuncture seeks to open these blockages, allowing the body to heal itself. This is done by inserting very thin needles into combinations of points along fourteen energy pathways that cover the body. These pathways are called *meridians*.

Why Should You Use It?

The following five points offer compelling reasons to consider using acupuncture.

Reason 1: Efficacy

The most obvious reasons you should add a new treatment to your health care arsenal is that it works equally well as, if not better than, your current regimen, while causing fewer side-effects.

Does acupuncture meet either of those criteria? According to a 1996 review of controlled clinical trials conducted around the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) concluded that acupuncture successfully treats 28 conditions, including the number one affliction plaguing Americans -- hypertension. The WHO also stated that acupuncture shows promise for treating 52 other conditions.

Since the WHO's review was conducted, numerous clinical studies have been launched in the West, yielding mixed results. Many have concluded that acupuncture is no better than "sham" acupuncture -- when patients are needled in non-acupuncture points. Critics of these studies cite their poor study design, as well as sample sizes that are too small to reach any meaningful conclusions. Based upon the inconclusive results, more funding needs to be allocated to research a health care modality that Americans are pursuing in record numbers. In 2007, there were 17.5 million acupuncture visits in the U.S., for an estimated out-of-pocket expense of \$1.1 billion.

Before conducting more studies, researchers need to answer two questions. First, why are so many people looking outside of Western medicine for their answers? Each year there are roughly one billion doctor visits in the United States. In an overburdened system, where the average doctor appointment lasts only seventeen minutes, it would seem logical that thousands, if not millions, of patients could slip through the cracks. With so little time to render an accurate diagnosis, it's no wonder that one in five patient visits results in a psychosomatic diagnosis.

From the patient's point of view, a psychosomatic diagnosis often leaves them feeling as if their doctor has marginalized their physical complaints, if not outright dismissed them. Despite classifying symptoms as having a psychological (or mental) origin, doctors are reaching increasingly for their script pads. According to the CDC, 74% of doctor visits result in some form of drug therapy. Often,

these drugs only mask the symptoms without making a dent in curing the underlying imbalance. Patients feel frustrated by the side effects and prospect of a life dependent upon chemicals. Soon, they see their only option for finding a lasting cure is to look outside of the current system.

The second, and more important question is, which style of acupuncture should the medical community be testing? Similar to the many styles of martial arts that exist, there are also many styles of acupuncture. When you consider the diversity of styles, it doesn't seem appropriate to perform clinical trials on one style and make generalizations about an entire medical practice.

Studies should first seek out the most effective styles for each condition. Then these styles should be tested against "sham" acupuncture as well as current mainstream therapies. Otherwise, there will never be accurate data with which to stem the growing rift between Eastern and Western medicine.

Recently, AcupunctureSurvey.com conducted a national survey of acupuncturists in the United States. Comments made by practitioners with more established practices had a common recommendation: Learn one of a handful of styles that are not currently taught in schools. Many attributed their success in part due to learning these other styles, asserting that the superior results they yielded were responsible for the strong word-of-mouth following they enjoyed with patients.

Having been one of the many patients who slipped through the cracks of Western medicine, my own journey led me through yoga, ayurveda, chiropractic, muscle testing, naturopathy, and eventually Chinese medicine. I landed on this path after being bounced around virtually every Western specialty. In total, I visited with more than 140 physicians over a fifteen-year period. Living in Boston afforded me access to many of the world's leading hospitals and physicians. After hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical expenses, my cure was not found in Western medicine, it was found in acupuncture ... a medical practice ridiculed by many of my Western physicians.

So, is acupuncture effective? ABSOLUTELY. Is all acupuncture created equal? No. In the absence of proper medical studies, it's up to you to do your own research through trial and error. For me, the fourth style of acupuncture I tried was the one that brought about lasting relief.

One final point I would like to make on this topic is related to the safety of acupuncture when administered by trained professionals. The risk of injury or death is infinitesimally low -- well below 1%. Compare this with the fact that the third leading cause of death in the United States is the Western medical system (given as "iatrogenic causes").

Reason 2: Economy

There are two economic reasons to consider acupuncture. The first reason relates to your personal economic situation. For many conditions, acupuncture is a viable economic alternative to drug therapy. If you average the total cost of obtaining a prescription for chronic conditions (including routine doctor visits, blood tests for liver and kidney damage, and the prescription) the average weekly expense is often higher than that of acupuncture. Factor in acupuncture's goal of curing many conditions that Western medicine merely aims to contain, and acupuncture begins looking very appealing.

It has been well-documented that job loss and illness go hand-in-hand. As the economic crisis has rippled its way across the globe, we've seen millions of people lose their jobs in its wake. Job loss

bring with it a loss of employer-sponsored health insurance at the exact moment when people become more susceptible to illness.

One viable solution is community acupuncture. The Community Acupuncture Network is comprised of clinics that treat people in a group setting at affordable rates. The cost per appointment ranges from \$15 to \$35. At these prices, acupuncture beats most drug therapies on a price comparison.

To understand the second economic reason for using acupuncture, you need to take a macroeconomic view of the US. During 2011, the first of the Baby Boomers began retiring. Over the next ten years, the number of retirees is expected to grow by 80% to 72 million people. With people living longer and the cost of health care skyrocketing, it appears unlikely that we will be able to pay for the services needed to care for the elderly.

To put this in perspective, some economists estimate that the U.S. entitlement liabilities add to \$115 trillion -- Social Security (\$15T), Medicare Part D (\$20T), and Medicare (\$80T). By comparison, the much-debated national debt appears rather frivolous at \$15 trillion.

Entitlement liabilities are calculated using a net present value calculation. As such, the expenses for current and near-term retirees (Baby Boomers) have the largest weight in the calculation.

Depending upon the interest rate, cost of living, and health care inflation assumptions used to calculate NPV, the net result is an additional cost of \$1 trillion to \$3.5 trillion per year over the next 30 years.

A quick look at the money supply data published by the Federal Reserve points to a rapid and sustained increase in the monetary base long after QE2 ended in June 2011. In the eight months following the end of QE2, the thirteen week moving averages for M1 and M2 roughly doubled to 20.4% and 10.0% year-over-year, respectively. When compared with the annualized sequential quarterly change, the growth shows an accelerating trend reaching 32.3% and 17.5%, respectively.

It's important to note that the numbers provided by the Fed took the sequential growth figures and simply multiplied them by four. If the numbers were compounded, arguably a preferable method, M1 and M2 would rise to 36.4% and 18.7%, respectively.

Note: Since this article was originally authored, the thirteen week moving average growth rates for M1 and M2 have declined to 12.7% and 6.8%.

So, why should you begin using acupuncture? Consider how the increase in entitlement spending will affect the money supply. The average spending required for Baby Boomers (\$2.25T) will expand the money supply at a rate of 25% per year. Keep in mind that this does not include the current \$1.7 trillion deficit. From the money-supply data above, it's safe to assume that some of this growth is already being printed. At our Greece-like debt-levels, it's unlikely investors will want to lend us money to pay for our entitlements in the future. To pay for it, the US. will have to print money, which sets the stage for hyper-inflation. Businesses will find it difficult to survive, and millions more people will lose their jobs and benefits. This is the reason gold has risen to \$1,700/oz.

One way the government may decide to combat this scenario is to ration health care spending. If you are a retiree, you are faced with not receiving care. This will lead to higher prices. Inflation will not only increase the cost of care, but you may see your saving erode so fast that you cannot afford care. Since most companies view doctors as their end customer, patients are left without a voice.

With so many patients and fewer doctors expected in the future, how likely is it that your doctor will accommodate your circumstances when there are so many other paying customers they can treat?

As previously discussed, community acupuncture offers an affordable solution to your needs.

Additionally, acupuncturists who are not beholden to insurance companies or group practices may find it easier to barter patients' goods and services for their services. Lastly, acupuncture is a service that offers immediate healing. Writing a prescription for a drug you cannot afford is not a service that offers any healing.

Reason 3: Environment

Whether or not you believe in drug therapy, you may not have a choice if you are one of the 40 million Americans exposed to pharmaceuticals through your drinking water. This is a testament to how prevalent pharmaceuticals have become in our daily life. While these exposures only exist in trace amounts, they are on the rise. There's no telling how high they will be in twenty years.

Replacing drugs with non-toxic acupuncture will reduce the amount of stress you place on your internal and external 'environments'. The body was not designed to consume so many chemicals day in and day out. As the waistlines of America have grown, so too has the storage space for these chemicals. Many toxins find homes in fat cells, only to poison the body over lengthy periods as they are released back into the bloodstream. This can lead to a variety of diseases.

I believe the Chinese medical pharmacy offers a viable solution for many of our maladies. While it may not offer a cure to the 'super bugs' we've seen as of late, antibiotics are not exactly the blockbuster category that drug companies have been pushing through direct-to-consumer advertising to earn billions of dollars in profits. For these indications--heart disease, sexual dysfunction, incontinence, cancer, and so on--Chinese herbal remedies do offer alternatives.

It's important to note that roughly a quarter of all pharmaceutical on the market are actually derived from herbs. However, rather than use the entire plant, science extracts what it thinks are the active ingredients without giving thought to how these chemicals interact with the discarded parts of the plant once inside the body. The East takes a 'holistic' approach to health, whereas the West takes a specialist approach. If you are reading this article from the confines of a cubicle in a large corporation, you know how well the compartmentalized organizational structure works when departments don't talk with each other or even know what's happening two rows away. This is the same reason the specialized modern medical system is failing so many people.

Lastly, herbal medicine is a sustainable resource that adds to the environment. It needs to be cultivated, not replaced by a process that destroys our drinking water and food supply.

Reason 4: Energy

As described by Chris Martenson in his video series, [The Crash Course](#), there is a strong argument

to be made that the world has already put peak oil in its rear view mirror. What does this mean? In the future, each barrel of oil will become increasingly expensive as it becomes more difficult to extract and refine. We are already seeing this reflected in oil prices, which politicians are conveniently attributing to speculators. The scary scenario comes when output dwindles to the point where supply equals demand. Countries that produce oil will begin to hoard their resources, which will dramatically reduce the available supply of oil on the market and further increase prices. If new energy sources are not discovered and made available on a mass scale, the world could see devastating disruptions to the food supply, not to mention health care.

Consider how much the health care system depends upon energy. Every diagnostic test, drug, medical supply, and device requires substantial amounts of energy and petroleum to run, produce, and ship. Now, compare that to acupuncture. Simply put, you can administer acupuncture by candle light. Similarly, Chinese medical diagnostic testing relies on something Western doctors have lost touch with ... the patient. The primary diagnosis is performed by palpating the pulse, along with other body parts, and an examination of the tongue. In addition to the patient's history, acupuncturists take into account the patient's body odor, appearance, and other physical and vocal observations. Chinese medicine creates a full medical system built around the patient and what you readily have available at your disposal.

If the next crisis we encounter is an energy crisis, acupuncture could be a valuable option for solving your health care needs.

Reason 5: Experience

Transitioning from a position in marketing or accounting to become an acupuncturist is more than a simple career change, it's a calling. Many of the people I've met who made this leap did so at the end of their own journey through a health care crisis. It's these types of experiences that build compassion in a practitioner, which brings us back to the first question asked in Reason 1--why are so many people looking outside of Western medicine? In addition to seeking answers to their problems, patients are looking for a level of compassion not found in Western medicine.

Another aspect of experience is 'age'. When someone decides to go to medical school, it's typically within a year or two after graduating from their undergraduate studies, if not immediately after. They've hardly worked or had any real world experience, yet they choose to make an enormous investment in a career at an age when they hardly know themselves. If they don't like their job or interacting with people, too bad. Once you go down a path with such a large debt burden, it's difficult to get off. Now, fast forward ten years into their career. If they feel stuck in the wrong career, pressured by hospital administrators to squeeze in more appointments, or have grown tired of a never ending stream of "whining patients", then the result will be compassion-less care.

Compare that to someone who is thirty-five years old, knows him or herself very well, has worked for a number of years in various positions and companies, and endured their own health care issues. It would appear the latter person is making a more informed decision that could lead to a happier career choice, and possibly more compassionate care.

Conclusion

Acupuncture offers an effective alternative for people who need help during these difficult economic times, as well as people who are interested in protecting the environment and conserving energy.

It's important to remember that there are many different styles of acupuncture that have developed over thousands of years. For Western science to accurately test acupuncture's efficacy against "sham" acupuncture or current Western treatments, researchers first need to find the best styles of acupuncture for a given condition.

Chris Titus is a native of Boston, Massachusetts. Over the past fifteen years, he has held various investment research positions with a focus on the health care sector. His first novel, [The God Complex](#), aims to make traditional Chinese medicine more accessible by giving it a mainstream story line. The resulting work offers readers an exciting and painless introduction to acupuncture, martial arts, and herbology. The novel draws upon his own experiences as both a patient in search of a cure and as a health care analyst. He hopes his novel will reach out to patients struggling to find a diagnosis, the families trying to understand their plight, and health care professionals. Chris plans to use the proceeds of his book to return to school and train as an acupuncturist.