

Acupuncture is gaining mainstream acceptance

Number of practitioners is growing as more people turn to Chinese treatment

By SUSAN KREIMER / Special to The Dallas Morning News (February 2005)

Richard and Iva Lim Peck have been in the acupuncture business together since 1986, treating everything from migraines to menstrual problems. And they've done it as many in the medical community have looked upon their field with skepticism.



RANDY ELI GROTHE/DMN

Dong-Rae Park (left) is a certified acupuncturist. Behind him, acupressurist Chibok Choi (standing) and acupuncturist Roger Oh treat Neal Jameson.

Now others are coming around to their way of thinking, said Ms. Peck, who co-founded the Integrated Center for Oriental Medicine in Plano with her husband.

"When we first started our practice in the Dallas area, there were only a handful of us," she said. "Western doctors and the general public were very skeptical about what we do."

And as perceptions change, the number of acupuncturists has been rising dramatically.

In Texas, there were 627 licensed practitioners as of January, compared with 300 in May 1997, according to the Texas State Board of Medical Examiners (www.tsbme.state.tx.us). Nationally, there are about 15,000 acupuncturists and 2,000 to 3,000 medical doctors who do acupuncture, said *Acupuncture Today* managing editor Michael Devitt.

NIH-funding study

A new study is giving acupuncturists more credibility. The ancient Chinese practice of piercing the body with needles at specific points was shown to decrease pain and improve function among patients with osteoarthritis of the knee when used with other treatments, said the study, published in the Dec. 21 *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Funded by the National Institutes of Health, the study has been heralded as the longest, largest and most extensive of its kind. It suggests that acupuncture may be a safe, effective treatment for those suffering with osteoarthritis.

"There has been a lot of interest. It's one of the most commonly used alternative therapies in the country," said Dr. Brian Berman, the study's principal investigator and director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland. "Since all the information in the news about the different drugs, people are looking for, 'Oh, what else can I do?' "

As a result of the drug scares, "alternative medicine all of a sudden becomes more mainstream – in our minds and in our culture," said Rebekah Christensen, executive director of the American Association of Oriental Medicine (www.aaom.org) in Sacramento, Calif.

The best acupuncturists collaborate with a patient's conventional doctors, she said.

"Each has a place in promoting and sustaining our overall health," Ms. Christensen said.

Many patients pay for acupuncture out of pocket because their insurance doesn't pay for it. Slowly, that, too, is changing.

"In the last couple of years, some insurance companies are seeing the cost savings from acupuncture and Oriental medicine and have started covering treatments," Ms. Peck said.

To be licensed, an acupuncturist must complete training and pass an exam through the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (www.nccaom.org). This includes a written test and demonstration of the "clean needle technique."

Four Texas schools are accredited, according to the Accreditation Commission of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine's Web site: the Dallas College of Oriental Medicine, Academy of Oriental Medicine at Austin, Texas College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in Austin and American College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine in Houston. The Dallas college reportedly closed this month. School officials couldn't be reached for comment.

Specialists in the future?

Dong-Rae Park, a North Dallas acupuncturist, hopes that eventually there will be specialty education and certification within his field.

"One acupuncturist is good for allergies and immune disorders, but not necessarily for low back pain," Mr. Park explained. In the ideal future, he said, "Consumers do not have to go to a general acupuncturist but can seek out the specialist who is best for their problem."

At the moment, though, he's pleased that research is fostering acceptance of the practice.

"That contributed a lot to public awareness," he said. "Now no one really questions the effectiveness of acupuncture."