

## Point, counterpoint

**As a medical treatment, ancient acupuncture has both devotees and doubters**

**By R.J. Ignelzi**

STAFF WRITER

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Only when the fear of living the rest of his life in pain became greater than his fear of needles did Matias Negatu consider acupuncture.

For more than two years, the 33-year-old mechanical engineer and international triathlete from Rancho Peñasquitos tried everything his doctor had to offer to help his severely injured thigh muscle: prescription drugs, ice, physical therapy. Nothing worked, and surgery was next on the list. Suddenly, acupuncture wasn't so scary.

"There's a desperation that comes with pain. I just wanted relief, so I thought I'd give it a shot, even though I was very apprehensive," Negatu says.

To treat the thigh area, licensed acupuncturist Tony Burris of Poway inserted hair-thin needles into Negatu's leg, big toe and the area between his thumb and index finger. After two sessions, the tightness and burning sensation in the tendon diminished. A couple of treatments after that, and he was pain-free.

"I was skeptical, but I'm a total believer now," says Negatu, who has acupuncture treatments about once a month "just to keep the muscles in tiptop shape."



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According to traditional Chinese medicine, inserting acupuncture needles in some of the 365 acupuncture points on the body can help control the flow of qi, an energy force that governs health.

A funny thing happened on the way to the 21st century: Acupuncture stopped seeming so weird.

Not long ago, only fringe-dwellers and extreme risk-takers dared dabble in the Chinese pain treatment that dates back more than 2,000 years. Today, many patients and doctors consider acupuncture a mainstream complementary treatment.

One in 10 adults has had acupuncture, according to the National Certification Commission of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, making it one of the most popular forms of alternative medicine.



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Acupuncture needles, the size of a couple of human hairs, are inserted into a patient's feet.

Public acceptance continues to widen as the biggest skeptics of all – American doctors – increasingly refer patients to licensed acupuncturists or perform needling themselves as an adjunct to conventional treatments, according to the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture.

As more medical doctors get in on the act, more clinical studies are being conducted testing acupuncture's effectiveness on everything from arthritis to migraines, and using imaging techniques to find out exactly how the needles work.

Even the normally conservative National Institutes of Health (NIH) seems to be coming around. Earlier this year, it said it considers preliminary studies of acupuncture's ability to treat pain and nausea promising enough to warrant a closer look.

But, that doesn't mean that acupuncture is a magic bullet – or needle. The treatment doesn't work for everyone, or for every complaint and condition. And critics contend that insufficient clinical testing fails to show it works at all.

To help you keep from getting stuck with a treatment that's not right for you, it's important to understand the finer points of acupuncture.

## **HOW DOES ACUPUNCTURE WORK?**

It all depends who you ask. According to traditional Chinese medicine, inserting acupuncture needles in more than 300 acupuncture points on the body helps control the flow of qi (pronounced chee), a vital energy force that governs health. Qi is said to circulate from one organ to

another along a network of about 20 pathways known as meridians. Illness and pain occur when qi becomes obstructed by poor diet, bad posture or unhealthy habits.

Some U.S. doctors don't buy into the Chinese concepts of qi and meridians. But, some of the same doctors believe acupuncture is effective because imaging studies of the nervous system have shown that the insertion of the needles triggers the flow of electromagnetic signals through the body, which in turn release pain-killing proteins called endorphins.

## **WHO CAN PRACTICE ACUPUNCTURE, AND WHAT KIND OF TRAINING IS REQUIRED?**

Licensed acupuncturists (with the initials "L.Ac." after their name) or physicians can perform acupuncture.

To practice acupuncture in California, an acupuncturist must be certified by the California Acupuncture Board. To receive licensing, acupuncturists must complete a three-to four-year, 3,000-hour education program at a board-approved school of acupuncture. There are 15 board-approved schools in the state and one in San Diego, Pacific College of Oriental Medicine.

Licensed acupuncturists also need 60 semester college credits. There are approximately 11,000 licensed acupuncturists in California.

Although special training isn't required before a physician can perform acupuncture, it's strongly recommended. The American Academy of Medical Acupuncture (AAMA), a professional society for trained physician acupuncturists, requires members to have a minimum of 200 hours of medical acupuncture training. Currently, UCLA School of Medicine operates the most extensive medical acupuncture training in the country.

There are approximately 500 physicians in the state offering acupuncture, and as many as 8,000 nationwide, according to the AAMA.

### **What conditions might acupuncture help?**

While the research on acupuncture's effectiveness is often mixed, it has been shown to bring relief for the following conditions in at least some studies:

- Osteoarthritis
- Knee pain
- Back, shoulder and neck pain
- Migraine headaches
- Nausea caused by chemotherapy and surgery
- Dental pain
- Depression and anxiety
- Some infertility and menstrual problems
- Fibromyalgia
- Asthma
- Tendinitis

A physician is likely to focus on the patient's source of pain and just treat that area. Other Western medical treatments may be used, including X-rays, prescription drugs and physical therapy.

A licensed acupuncturist will likely treat the entire person.

"An acupuncturist must look at the patient's whole life to have good (treatment) results. We need to know what's going on in their mind, body and spirit," says licensed acupuncturist and herbalist Kristin Burris of Poway, wife of acupuncturist Tony Burris.

Licensed acupuncturists also may use other Oriental medicine treatments including massage, acupressure, breathing techniques and dietary supplements to restore health.

### **For what conditions has acupuncture been shown to be ineffective?**

There's been no real evidence of benefit in the following ailments:

- Tinnitus (ringing in the ears)
- Psoriasis
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Seizures
- Hot flashes
- Periodontal disease
- Addictions (smoking, drugs, overeating) when acupuncture is used alone

### **WHAT HAPPENS DURING A TREATMENT?**

From one to 30 needles may be used. They are usually inserted between one-eighth of an inch and 1 inch deep, and most patients feel only a slight discomfort – a tingling feeling known as deqi (da-chee) upon insertion. The acupuncturist may twist the needles or flick them to stimulate the acupuncture point. Some needles will be placed near the source of pain. Others may be inserted at one of the acupoints on the body, including the head, hands and feet.

The needles are typically left in for 20 to 35 minutes.

Many acupuncturists add what look like tiny jumper cables to the needles for a slight electrical charge.

"The very gentle electrical stimulation enables you to get different endorphins or serotonins released at different frequencies," says Dr. Robert Bonakdar, director of pain management at Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine. "By adding electricity, you get a jump start on the treatment."

### **DOES ACUPUNCTURE HURT?**

Acupuncture needles are much thinner than hypodermic needles, about the width of two or three human hairs. The disposable, stainless steel needles are also solid and don't have the beveled cutting-edge point of

injection needles, so they're not as painful on insertion and there's little risk of bruising and skin irritation.

Certain acupuncture points on the body can be more sensitive than others, especially if the patient is suffering acute pain. And, some longer, thicker needles (often required when treating large muscles in the thigh or buttocks) can cause more discomfort than the shorter, thinner needles.

### **HOW SOON CAN YOU EXPECT RELIEF?**

Don't expect to feel significantly better after one treatment. Most practitioners see patients once or twice a week for four to six weeks. Persistent problems, such as chronic back pain, can require monthly maintenance visits after the initial pain is relieved.

### **DO YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN ACUPUNCTURE FOR IT TO WORK?**

It helps, but it isn't necessary. Acupuncture is used successfully on animals, which don't understand or believe in the process.

### **HOW MUCH DOES ACUPUNCTURE COST?**

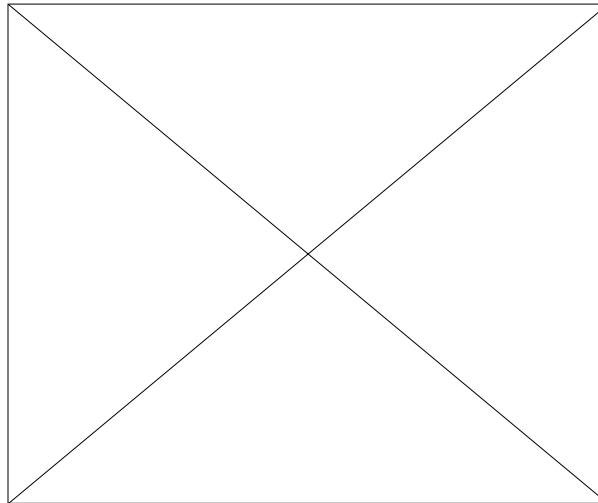
The cost varies, but initial treatments run from \$90 to \$140, and subsequent treatments from \$60 to \$90. Some insurers, including PPOs and HMOs, cover at least part of the expense.

### **WHAT IS THE MAJOR CRITICISM OF ACUPUNCTURE?**

Some scientists say the benefits of acupuncture are unproven and that it lacks sufficient clinical testing to show it to be efficacious. After all, you can't find qi under a microscope or study it in the lab.

Skeptics say that any positive results that acupuncture patients feel are due to the placebo effect, and that the pain would have eventually gone away without treatment. Acupuncture practitioners argue, however, that it's not possible to test acupuncture the modern medicine way.

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"Double-blind placebo-controlled clinical studies are impossible with acupuncture," Bonakdar says. "But acupuncture shouldn't be held up to the same parameters (as Western medical treatments). It doesn't fit into that paradigm."

## **HOW DO YOU FIND A REPUTABLE ACUPUNCTURIST?**

- Make sure the acupuncturist is licensed by the state (unless it's a medical acupuncturist.)
- Check with the California Acupuncture Board to find out if there are any disciplinary actions on the acupuncturist's record.
- If it's a medical acupuncturist, ask if he had special training, how many hours of training and if he is a member of the American Academy of Medical Acupuncture.
- Ask your health care provider to recommend an acupuncturist.
- Ask family and friends who have been satisfied with their acupuncturist.
- Check out the acupuncturist's Web site.
- Ask the prospective acupuncturist where he was trained and how long he's been practicing.
- Ask about the needling technique. Some offer a light touch, while others have a more forceful approach.
- Ask about the course of treatment. How many treatments does the acupuncturist estimate you will need? Normally, five to 10 treatments may be required. If there are no benefits in that time, acupuncture probably won't help your ailment.
- Ask about price and if he accepts your insurance plan.
- If you're not comfortable with the practitioner's answers to your questions or the office environment, walk out.

## **INFORMATION FROM THE PRACTITIONERS**

For more information about acupuncture:

- American Academy of Medical Acupuncture,  
**[www.medicalacupuncture.org](http://www.medicalacupuncture.org)** or (323) 937-5514
- California Acupuncture Board,  
**[www.acupuncture.ca.gov](http://www.acupuncture.ca.gov)** or (916) 445-3021

■National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine,  
**[www.nccam.nih.gov](http://www.nccam.nih.gov)** or (888) 644-6226

■American Association of Oriental Medicine,  
**[www.aaom.org](http://www.aaom.org)** or (866) 455-7999

■National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental  
Medicine,  
**[www.nccaom.org](http://www.nccaom.org)** or (703) 548-9004.

■National Acupuncture Foundation,  
**[www.nationalacupuncturefoundation.org](http://www.nationalacupuncturefoundation.org)** or (860) 455-4424

■National Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Alliance,  
**[www.acupuncturealliance.org](http://www.acupuncturealliance.org)** or (253) 851-6896

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