

Acupuncture becoming more common in U.S.

Health matters

A column

By VALERIE DeLAUNE

Have you ever been curious about what acupuncture could do for you? Though acupuncture is a 5,000-year-old practice, it has only recently been gaining widespread acceptance in the U.S.

Many people are nervous about their first appointment because acupuncture is unfamiliar, or they are afraid of needles and unwilling to try it. L.B., now a firm believer, recalls her first visit. "I was apprehensive and didn't want to look at the needles, but I wanted to find a new way to treat my body, a different pathway to heal health issues that weren't resolving with Western methods."

A typical first office visit lasts 1 1/2 hours, and includes a comprehensive medical history form, a complete interview and a treatment. No detail is insignificant in Chinese Medicine. Often patients initially feel hesitant reporting symptoms such as their feet feeling hot at night, or sweating only on their head. But they soon find that it all counts toward the final diagnosis and treatment plan, even if in Western medicine their symptoms would be considered unrelated.

Many patients feel better just being able to spend so much time with a practitioner and appreciate the holistic approach. "It's nice to have permission to tell my practitioner all my symptoms, that she is paying attention and taking the time, since those symptoms are important. It validates me," says L.B.

The needles are thin, like a hair. While needles can cause some stinging, usually the patient can't feel the needles being inserted, or they are merely aware the needle has been inserted.

Initially associated mostly with pain relief in this country, Americans are now discovering that acupuncture works for many different medical and emotional conditions. The World Health Organization has cited acupuncture as being effective in treating over 43 conditions including allergies, asthma, colds and flu, constipation, depression, gynecological disorders, headache, insomnia, injuries and stress.

Eastern and Western medicines are being integrated now, with acupuncture being used in hospitals, drug treatment programs and clinics. In some cases Chinese Medicine provides an effective complementary therapy, such as with chemotherapy. A 1997 American Medical Association study showed that more than two-thirds of U.S. medical schools offered elective classes on Eastern medicine. Some physicians in Juneau recommend acupuncture to patients, particularly to patients who have been having difficulty obtaining relief from their symptoms.

Insurance companies now are either covering acupuncture to some degree, or are waiting for the final results from studies demonstrating that acupuncture will save them money by reducing the cost of drugs, long-term care and surgeries. The federal government does recognize acupuncture as a legitimate medical expense, but so far the state of

Alaska has chosen not to include acupuncture in the statute listing providers that insurance companies must cover. For now many patients must pay out-of-pocket, but as acupuncture gains increasing acceptance this will slowly change.

If you have questions about whether your condition can be treated with acupuncture, call your local acupuncturist. Usually a brief phone call will give you some idea, though a diagnosis cannot be made over the phone.

Valerie DeLaune is an acupuncture and massage specialist in Juneau.