

Guest Editorial

Integrative Medicine and Acupuncture: More Than Menu of Modalities

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THE TORTUOUS ASCENT TO JOIN political communities together mirrors another—that to integrate world medicines. If one believes in a purposeful universe, the similarity in timing and intent must be more than a coincidence. The “integrating” can be likened to Traditional Chinese Medicine’s “harmonizing.” Like the body’s organs, each political community needs to maintain integrity while working well with others, seeing itself as a part of a shared, greater whole.

Likewise, medical acupuncture’s efforts to meld Western and Asian medicines have been and will hopefully remain an ongoing evolution. But, like nations, the path disappears into a cloud of political noise. Why should this be? Medicines are as much an expression of science as culture. That sounds like a truism, as long as we are talking about others, not us. Yet those who perceive our Western reliance on technology as sometimes bordering on veneration may also admit that our science, too, can be determined by our culture. (Why else would an instrument’s data be deemed “objective,” relative to that from its “subjective” human creator, even in instances where the latter is clearly more sensitive?) As medical acupuncturists, we have planted our feet in both camps, in our medicine and culture along with those alien to us. How we grasp “foreign” treatments and rework them to make them “ours” may potentially create a new standard.

Today, mainstream medicine is beginning to accept acupuncture as a “modality” and present “integrative treatments” with an enthusiasm that can, at times, sound alarmingly “politically correct.” Progressive facilities now offer menus of treatments. They are presented as “a la carte” or “fixed price” series of protocols. In the most casual and

often high-priced instances, the acupuncture or massage may be add-on “side dishes.” But a buffet of modalities does not necessarily lead to good results. Truly *integrating* medicines is a thought-intensive process. No matter how exotic or ordinary, modalities need to have congruent intents to be effective.

“Harmonized” treatments are already happening. A cancer patient gets surgery and concurrent acupuncture and/or essential oils applied to acupuncture points for immune support and skin protection. Medications with auricular acupuncture can more effectively reduce arousal for the agitated patient. Instead of feeling “snowed,” he/she can feel normal. A diabetic patient uses insulin to address blood sugar and looks to moxibustion to strengthen his digestion (Spleen Qi deficiency).

How do we deepen this “harmonization?” One path has led to validating acupuncture by applying our “gold standard.” This research often measures acupuncture’s effectiveness compared to drugs for the same disorder. Yet, at any moment, acupuncture’s impact may be therapeutic but quite different from medications. Rather than an end in itself, the shared symptom reduction could be viewed as the appetizer of integration to come.

As medical acupuncturists, we know acupuncture is more than a modality. It evolved from extensive theories and philosophy. Can we look to them, also, to enrich our understanding and practice of our own medicine? That could be another path of integration.

For example, American psychiatry has become “stuck” on neurotransmitters in the brain. This particular biological model, shaped at least in part by pharmaceutical offerings, has come to dominate other approaches. Medical school

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differentials have been set aside. The current conventional psychiatric thinking is that mental illness simply does not happen below the neck.

Yet recently in my practice, a “young” elderly patient, doing well for several years, had relapsed into depression. He also looked worse-for-wear medically. Triglycerides were up, along with his bigger, colder belly. “For weeks now I just lay in bed with my kitties, eat nachos, and watch old movies. I have ideas but somehow I don’t get up and do them. It’s like I don’t care.” His red splotchy face, greasy tongue with peeled sides and tip, and full pulses was a clue to hold off on an antidepressant adjustment. This mental problem may not be about the brain. (The knee-jerk response of symptom to prescription is what most of us are fleeing.) Instead, acupuncture to stimulate his congested Liver Qi gave him 18 hours of normalcy. Two weeks of Liver cleanse and he resumed his water aerobics. Next stop may be essential oils to rebuild and maintain his Liver and mood.

Over the past decades, there has been a subtle shift in psychiatry and I suspect, in much of medicine. Drugs have come to dictate disease models and lab results have insidiously replaced the human clinical exam that once included touching. How many of us have heard about an ailing emergency department patient sent home and told he is fine because his labs are fine?

We have the chance to infuse a new take on our own medicine. There is an under-recognized abyss between what patients say and what lab tests and x-rays tell us. “Lab results are fine” does not necessarily mean “nothing is wrong.”

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) teaches that Liver congestion leads to symptoms, including depression, due to its Qi circulation role. As medical acupuncturists, we know that labs are not sufficiently sensitive to detect that con-

gestion at the level where patients experience its symptoms. Someone with fibromyalgia who relapses with pain and mental clouding likely also has this Liver stagnation. We can be filling-in the diagnostic and treatment dots that don’t connect in our more traditional field.

A woman with escalating and inoperable seizures presented. Her MRI found the focus, the cingulate gyrus, but with no surgical way to get at it. But we can, with a needle and earlobe. Not so strange (to us), that was the only sensitive spot on both ears aside from her left master shoulder. Two years of monthly acupuncture and her seizures were controlled with reduced frequency and transformed from grand mal to petit mal. The right cingulate gyrus gave up its sensitivity. This migrated to the left Zero Point and limbic area.

We live in a sufficiently user-unfriendly world such that both healing and symptomatic approaches are desperately needed. But few can afford to take leave from their lives while they heal. Medications offer the chance to stay functional. But pills alone cannot address our complex illnesses.

As medical acupuncturists, we have much to offer beyond legitimizing acupuncture. Acupuncture has much to offer beyond relaxation for stress. Feet planted in different worlds, we can draw from both to create novel treatments not adequately addressed by either one.

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