

QUESTIONS PATIENTS ASK



Acupuncture addresses the spirit wounded by serious illness...and it increases the strength of the immune system.

BY CLAYTON E. SPIVEY

Can acupuncture help people with life-threatening illness?

The best way I can answer this question about acupuncture and life-threatening illness is to begin with the story of David, my friend and first patient with AIDS. We began his treatment while I was still a student, and we knew that it was going to be a learning experience for both of us: I would share my knowledge and skill, while David would teach me about living well to the end. I have since applied my learnings with patients who had different kinds of cancer, as well as other diseases that threaten their quality of life and their very existence.

David had been a husky, active, robust 200 pounds when I first met him. Then AIDS ravished his body, mind and spirit. This was in 1990, when Western medical treatments for the symptoms of AIDS were few, hard to get, expensive, and had many side effects. David had no appetite, and his weight had plummeted to 94 pounds. His eyes had a frightened look, and his mind was uninterested in many things that he once loved. His mood ranged from

cranky to depressed, and his doctors had prescribed antidepressants in addition to the endless medications (all of which had side effects) for all the infections, aches and pains that assaulted him. When David moved from Ohio to be nearer the NIH physicians who treated him, I encouraged him to give acupuncture a try. I had seen acupuncture restore vitality to many others with serious illnesses, and I hoped to see for myself the potential of acupuncture to help David (and others) live out what could be the end of their lives.

Within three months of beginning our work together, David went from 94 to 116 pounds. His appetite returned, and he joyously proclaimed he was "eating everything in sight." David's night-sweats diminished almost totally. His depression soon lifted so that he took an interest in taking walks, riding the bus to the mall, and baking and cooking, two of his passions. His interest in life returned. Though he still had recurrence of some symptoms, he now heard the symptoms as

signals to come in for an acupuncture treatment, to rest more, or to change his diet.

Acupuncture helped David cope with the everyday concerns of all people with serious illness: the many trips to the hospital, the problems with family and friends, and having enough energy and interest to do even the simplest tasks that the rest of us take for granted. I believe that treatment helped him become more aware of what he wanted to get out of his life. Together we listed all he wanted to get done before he died, and how he would go about doing it.

David's journey was a healing, though not the healing that we tend to think of—toward a perfect, disease-free body. Few of us will ever have such a body, whether or not we have AIDS, cancer, or any other potentially terminal illness. Although his healing journey included an easing of his physical symptoms, most especially it included the healing of his relationships and spirit: David healed into his death.

These lessons that David and I learned in the early

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years of my practice have been useful to me since, as I have worked with others who had HIV, cancer, or other serious illnesses. It is important to know what Chinese medicine has to offer: that acupuncture is complementary to Western medical care, that the acupuncturist will work *with* your physician, and that acupuncture is safe and effective.

Occasionally a patient will arrive at my door looking to acupuncture for a cure. Western physicians may have given up on the patient, or conventional treatments may not be working to the satisfaction of the patient and her family, and hope for a cure has led the person to search out “alternative providers” for promises that we dare not make and cannot keep.

While I personally, as an acupuncturist, have seen patients’ HIV viral levels return to zero; while I have seen both benign and malignant tumors become substantially reduced and/or undetectable; and while I have seen clients live many years beyond predicted life-expectancy, I would never promise a cure.

No responsible practitioner would. Acupuncture should *not* be seen as a cure for HIV, AIDS, cancer, or other acute life-threatening illness. It *is*, however, an enormous resource for healing at every level—body, mind, spirit—for those dealing with such illness.

As acupuncturists, our promise is that we will walk the journey with our client, whatever that journey may be. We promise to be his partner through his frustration, grieving, fear, and the unknown.

Emotional and spiritual partnership, however, is not the only thing we offer. Acupuncture offers a great deal to the quality of life of the seriously ill patient:

■ Acupuncture treatments increase the strength of the immune system and the body’s innate responses to invasive disease; thus, the person is much more able to muster his biological reserves and defenses to better handle the complex battles incurred by the disease, the drugs, and the opportunistic infections that accompany serious illness.

■ Acupuncture also offers

some measure of relief from the side effects of medication: nausea, itching, fatigue, sleeplessness, dehydration, constipation, moodiness, and irritability, among others. Sometimes medications may seem worse than the conditions they address, and elimination or reduction of side effects can be a welcome event.

■ Acupuncture can help with some persistent difficulties that rob people of the pleasure of life, keeping them from living to the fullest. For example, acupuncture can often relieve depression, a common side effect of many illnesses.

■ Acupuncture can help with digestive disturbances, thus improving appetite and enjoyment of food. By doing so, it also may help a person retain weight or gain much-needed poundage as a cushion against future weight loss and debility. Nourishment helps fight disease.

■ Several of my patients have noticed that their blood counts (red blood cells or T-cells) increased substantially after their acupuncture treatments. While there are no

controlled studies to substantiate this effect, it is not uncommon for blood counts to rise when a person feels good and has a brighter outlook on life, definite by-products of acupuncture treatment.

■ Since acupuncture makes no distinctions between body, mind, and spirit, acupuncture is a wonderful way to address the spirit wounded by serious illness. Fear and grief are potent suppressors of both the spirit and the immune system. Acupuncture can help a person cope with the grief of a life cut short and the loss of family and friends. Acupuncture helps the person maintain stability at a very deep level, even in the face of fear of the unknown. It can help make the journey richer and more peaceful. Acupuncture is not just for physical problems.

For those with serious illnesses, acupuncture is a wonderful complement to Western medicine—a partner, not an “alternative.” With any life-threatening illness, patients should continue Western medical care. It’s important for me to know that pa-

tients are receiving the Western treatment that will often prolong their lives.

As an acupuncturist who has worked with many seriously ill patients, I have encountered Western physicians who are not only skeptical about the usefulness of acupuncture in the care of their patients, but are also concerned about the safety of acupuncture for those who may be immune compromised, or who are on chemotherapies that create bleeding problems or other conditions that might risk the health and safety of the patient. If this is the case, I would recommend that physicians, patients, or family members with these concerns discuss them directly with an acupuncture practitioner. A few general comments would be appropriate here, however.

■ Acupuncture needles are sterile and disposable. The needles are solid stainless steel, so nothing is injected or withdrawn. There is no chance of disease transmission between acupuncture clients. Ask if your practitioner is certified in the national “Clean

Needle Technique” developed with input from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control Prevention, the U.S. Public Health Service, and OSHA.

■ Acupuncture needles are *very* thin—about the thickness of a hair—and are designed to push cells apart rather than cut through them. (I use a 40 gauge needle, whereas blood transfusion needles are about 18 gauge—the higher the gauge number, the thinner the needle.) As such, bleeding rarely occurs with an acupuncture needle. There is no danger of major blood loss, even in patients with the risk of bleeding problems or those on anticoagulants.

■ While insurance companies differ in their policies about covering acupuncture treatments, in most states patients do not need permission or referral from their physicians to receive acupuncture treatment. Patients have the right to pursue acupuncture treatment whether or not their physician encourages them to do so.

I have been privileged to share in the final journeys of



Photo by Carol Cathcart

quite a few patients. They have taught me what acupuncture can bring to the rigorous process of living with serious illness: physical relief of symptoms, mental calm and clarity, and spiritual peace.

Finally, a word to the caregivers and supporters of people with serious illness: caring for yourselves can help make the task of loving and caring for others somewhat easier. Your health can make a difference in the health of your friend, partner, spouse, or child. The strength of the

tree to withstand great winds lies in its flexibility and its firm roots. Having a plan to maintain your own health and stability can help you cope with the stress of crisis. Consider the benefits of acupuncture for yourself as well.

Clayton Elizabeth Spivey, M.Ac., L.Ac., Dipl.Ac., teaches at the Tai Sophia Institute and maintains a private practice in Columbia, Maryland.