

Healing Options: Scalp Acupuncture

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by S. Laurance Johnston, Ph.D.

Scalp acupuncture is a specialized form of acupuncture that has helped many people with nervous-system disorders, including spinal-cord injury (SCI) and multiple sclerosis (MS).

The leading force behind the therapy's emergence has been Professor Ming Qing Zhu. A 1964 Shanghai University of Traditional Chinese Medicine graduate, Zhu has become an internationally recognized and acclaimed acupuncturist who has authored many publications, including a scalp acupuncture textbook, and lectured throughout the world. Assisted by his associate, Moyee Siu, Zhu currently operates clinics in San Jose and Santa Cruz, Calif.

Supplementing traditional body acupuncture ("Acupuncture an Alternative Therapy??" or www.healingtherapies.info), specific areas such as the ear, foot, hand, and scalp represent acupunctural microsystems for the entire body. Through treating a localized microsystem, health-enhancing energy flow (also called qi) can be stimulated in virtually any body part.

Although the scalp acupuncture microsystem can treat most of the same disorders as traditional acupuncture, it is especially effective with nervous-system disorders and pain.

According to Zhu, scalp acupuncture will almost invariably reduce MS symptoms' severity. Because so many people with the disorder have been treated, a specific MS protocol has been developed and disseminated for use by other acupuncturists (see www.scalpacupuncture.org).

Over his career, Zhu has also treated about 20 people with SCI. Although he emphasizes that scalp acupuncture is not a cure-all panacea, he says most of his SCI patients have accrued significant quality-of-life-enhancing health benefits, even though treatment was usually initiated long after time of acute injury (the most optimal therapeutic window). Even with chronic injuries, dramatic improvements occasionally occur. For example, one patient with a T11 gunshot injury came in for pain treatment and ended up regaining considerable walking ability.

Very fine needles are painlessly inserted at a 15–30° angle into the thin layer of scalp tissue in treatment zones associated with specific body functions and regions. To stimulate qi flow, the needles are periodically manipulated.

Because the needles are inserted in the scalp, patients can receive treatment in

any position and the needles can be left in for extended treatment-enhancing time periods without interfering with daily activities. Typically, the needles remain inserted for at least the 2-hour clinic visit and often up to 72 hours.

While the needles are inserted, Zhu encourages patients to move the affected body parts or, at minimum, visualize the movement accompanied with qigong-based breathing practices that help direct the qi flow to the intended area. He believes such treatment-associated movement is critical in improving connections between the central and peripheral nervous systems.

Even in paralysis cases, Zhu encourages these movements, using, as necessary, assistive devices or the help of others.

At Zhu's clinic, I talked to Alessandro, an articulate, energetic 40-year-old quadriplegic with a charismatic smile and infectious enthusiasm. Before his injury he led an active lifestyle that reflected his love of the outdoors.

In 1997, Alessandro's life changed in an instant due to a renegade wave he chose to body surf.

"A small two-foot wave became an eight-foot face that took my 6'2", 215-pound body over the falls and dropped me headlong into the sand below.... I immediately heard a crack...and knew under no uncertain terms I was paralyzed."

With his fifth cervical vertebrae now crushed, Alessandro notes, "What was once an active, adventurous outdoor lifestyle became an active, internal pursuit of recovery."

Alessandro believes Zhu's care, treatment, and support were foremost in this pursuit and says Zhu is his "primary doctor."

Alessandro says he's fortunate to have been treated by Zhu initially only 12 days postinjury.

"My initial treatment with Zhu in the hospital was not only incredibly and literally electrifying, but it really made me feel more at ease with my situation physically, psychologically, and emotionally," he says. "Moreover, Zhu's therapy significantly aided in getting me off the pain pills I was taking as well as other drugs."

In spite of an original prognosis limiting his future activity to a "sip and puff" wheelchair, Alessandro has regained considerable function, which he attributes to Zhu's treatment combined with his rigorous physical-therapy regimen. Alessandro has regained arm strength, some wrist control, and hand sensation, enabling him to use a phone handset and feed himself without a splint. Because he has also regained abdominal, lower-back, and paraspinal muscles, he is

almost at the point of doing unassisted weight shifts and lifting his torso upright in his standing frame. This additional torso strength has enabled him to sit for a long time while exercising on his mat table. For example, he can swing his arms back and forth in an exaggerated walking motion without assistance or falling over.

Moreover, Alessandro says Zhu's treatment has greatly enhanced his overall wellness, allowing him to direct his energy to functional recovery rather than just attempting to stay well.

Scalp acupuncture represents yet another alternative healing modality whose underlying philosophy and successful clinical track record does not negate, but rather supplements, conventional medicine's many important contributions. If we can set aside our progress-inhibiting illusions of knowledge and attempt to open-mindedly integrate divergent healthcare perspectives, such as scalp acupuncture, we will have an expanded healing spectrum that can only benefit people with disabilities.

For more information, check out www.scalpacupuncture.org or call (408) 885-1288.

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