

Is acupuncture safe?: evidence from UK

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Two large prospective studies have been conducted in the UK with the aim of determining the incidence of adverse events associated with acupuncture practice. The SAFA study included doctors and physiotherapists who practice acupuncture alongside their routine therapy. The York study included practitioners of traditional acupuncture (who may or may not practice other therapies including Chinese herbs or, in a few cases, conventional treatments).

The two surveys were undertaken using a similar methodology. The sample size for each study was 30,000 consultations, calculated in order to determine whether the incidence of pneumothorax was less than 1:10,000, with 95% confidence. In the SAFA study, minor events associated with acupuncture were recorded routinely by 78 acupuncturists each month during a 21 month period on special forms developed for the purpose and modified after piloting. and significant, dangerous and unusual events were reported individually as they occurred. In the York study, data were reported by 574 practitioners over one month, using similar forms and definitions.

The adverse events occurring during a total of over 66 000 treatments were reported. The commonest adverse event reported was bleeding (lasting more than 10 seconds) or haematoma, which occurred in 3.1% and 2.1% of consultations, respectively. Needling pain occurred in 1.1% and 1.2% of consultations, and aggravation of symptoms after 1% and 2.8% of consultations. A range of other minor events occurred less frequently than these .

There were no adverse events in either study that met the standard definition of 'serious'. A total of 86 significant events were reported in the two studies: the most serious of these was a reflex anoxic seizure and none produced any lasting adverse events. Some avoidable events occurred, included forgotten patients, forgotten needles and moxa burns.

The publication of these reports in a mainstream medical journal was accompanied by an editorial which concluded that 'acupuncture is a very safe intervention in the hands of a competent practitioner'.