Clinical Trials of Acupuncture for Low Back Pain:

What have they taught us about acupuncture's effectiveness?

Karen J. Sherman

Senior Scientific Investigator

Group Health Center for Health Studies, USA

Background: Substantial controversy exists surrounding the effectiveness of acupuncture for low back pain, largely due to poor quality studies. Recent large, well-designed European trials suggest that acupuncture shows similar short term benefits for verum and sham acupuncture needling, but that needling is superior to usual medical care. We designed a two-site randomized controlled trial to evaluate the importance of needle location and insertion on therapeutic benefits of acupuncture.

Methods: 638 patients with chronic back pain were randomized to receive individual acupuncture, standardized acupuncture, simulated acupuncture or care as usual. Ten treatments were given over 7 weeks by experienced acupuncturists. Back-related function and symptoms were assessed at baseline, 8, 26, and 52 weeks by telephone interviewers unaware of treatment group.

Results: Compared to those receiving usual care, patients receiving verum or simulated acupuncture were more likely to show clinically important improvements in dysfunction (60% vs. 39%, $p<0.0001$) or symptom bothersomeness (50% vs. 32%; $p=0.0004$) at the end of treatment, with attenuated benefits persisting for dysfunction over the one year follow-up period.

Conclusion: Acupuncture was more beneficial than care as usual, but neither customizing needle location to the patient nor inserting needles were related to these benefits. These findings extend those of other large trials. They may be interpreted from at least 3 different perspectives (i.e., of medical efficacy trials, of traditionally trained acupuncturists, of whole system researchers). Suggestions for further research and clinical recommendations are provided in light of our knowledge regarding effective treatments for chronic back pain.

Keywords: USA, acupuncture, chronic low back pain, clinical trials, treatment;