

## ACUPUNCTURE: QI IN THE BALANCE

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When Blues hockey player Jim Campbell hits the ice, he knows that pain is part of the game. But after battling it out for the Blues, Campbell's banged up and bruised body finds relief in tiny little needles. Campbell's father introduced his son to an acupuncturist in Boston four years ago, and Campbell's been an advocate for the ancient Chinese art of acupuncture ever since. "It speeds up the recovery time from injuries, and it helps my concentration skills," says the Blues right-winger. "I've had it before games, and it really relaxes me."

A panel organized by the National Institute of Health concluded that acupuncture does alleviate pain and nausea in certain circumstances and that it is "probably effective" in treating several other symptoms. The FDA later reported that acupuncture needles should join scalpels and syringes as respected tools of medicine. JAMA reported that the traditional Chinese medical treatment of burning herbs to stimulate acupuncture points on pregnant women encouraged fetuses in the breech position to turn in the womb. However, the agency's research on administering acupuncture to relieve pain caused by HIV-related nerve damage showed that such treatment is not effective. What scientists do know is that acupuncture produces measurable brain-wave changes.

Acupuncturists believe that when things go awry in the body, there is an imbalance of the

complementary life forces of yin and yang, and that acupuncture can bring the body into equilibrium. They recognized that there is a vital energy, or life force, known as *qi* (pronounced chee), which flows through the body and is the source of movement, ranging from voluntary muscle action to blood flow. The *qi* protects us from external influences and generates warmth while balancing the body, mind, and spirit. It flows through the body to the organs by interconnected pathways called meridians. If the flow of the force is disturbed, the theory goes, the blockage or stagnation of energy causes illness. Skeptics question how sticking needles in the ear can affect a malfunctioning liver. One explanation is that when certain points of the body are stimulated, opiates, or natural morphine-like substances, are released into the central nervous system to rapidly fight pain and heal wounds. Substantial evidence indicates that by releasing these endorphin-like substances, acupuncture may stimulate the nervous system as well as set off other chemical reactions that aid the body in fighting inflammation.

Traditional Chinese medicine combines acupuncture with herbal remedies to treat the body, mind, and spirit. The herbal potions look like the ingredients in a witch's brew. Beetle wings, mushrooms, roots, lichen, dried herbs, and flower caps are a few of the ingredients that are boiled into tea. Drunk bit

by bitter bit, the infusion is said to make pain disappear.

Dr. Xincheng Jiang, known affectionately as "Dr. Ginger" to her patients, practices traditional Chinese medicine in the back of an oriental gift shop in the Chinese Trading Center.

A series of radiation treatments for throat cancer left Sam Temperato with a dry mouth and a loss of taste. His wife, Joanna, was constantly suffering from lower back pain. The couple decided to consult Dr. Ginger. "Acupuncture is very effective for long-term problems," says Temperto, while adding that acupuncture was only somewhat effective in treating his condition. "Conventional doctors told my wife that her back problems were bad enough to warrant surgery, but Dr. Ginger's treatments worked immediately and prevented her from having a serious operation."

How acupuncture works remains a mystery to most Western physicians, and the notion that a body's "life force" can be balanced by pricking critical points with tiny needles sounds more like quackery than medicine to skeptics. But advocates counter that their claims are supported by hundreds of research studies - not to mention that it has had a successful track record that extends back thousands of years - and that, they say, ought to be evidence enough.