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INTRODUCTION

This is a supporting document to the micro-teaching on 'Acupuncture' for lower back pain (LBP) treatment. Historical background of acupuncture as a complementary medicine is treated. The document would speak about the uses of acupuncture. It would also consider the efficacy of acupuncture medicine. The document would also highlight on the indication and contraindication of acupuncture treatment comparing to western or conventional medicine in the treatment of LBP. The overall effectiveness of acupuncture treatment would be touched on in conclusion.

HISTORY OF ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture is a treatment method that originated in China over 3000 years ago. The theory of acupuncture was first found from the works of Huang Di Nei Jing. His writings dated from the Han dynasty in the 2nd century BC. The human body was regarded as an image of heavenly body and the physicians' role is to keep the body in equilibrium both internally and in relation to the external environment. Another writer called Nan Jin presented the comprehensive theories of points and channels also during the Han dynasty. Causes of illness, diagnosis, and therapeutic needling were addressed by Nan Jin (Helms, 1998)

Acupuncture is known to be part of the best complementary medicine. It is a treatment method considered normal in China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. It has gained popularity in the USA and other Western countries, the United Kingdom (UK) included, since the late 1970s.

Thin solid needles, about 0.1270mm in diameter, are inserted into the flesh around the lower back where the pain is located. There is a classical description of points displayed in orderly array on meridians or "channels of energy flow" that are mapped onto the surface of the body (Sierpina, 2005). In acupuncture, there are two elements linked to channels of energy flow. They are called 'yin' and 'yang'. Yin refers to the feminine aspects of life: nourishing, lower, soft, yielding, receptive, protective. Yang refers to male aspects: hard, dominant, energetic, hot, excessive, outside, creative. Qi, which is the important element in the healing system of acupuncture, is the movement between yin and yang. It flows through the energy channels continuously. When there is disequilibrium in the flow of Qi among the channels, organs and five elements which are: (fire, earth, metal, water, and wood), then there is pain or disease. Acupuncturists bring equilibrium in the factors like heat, cold, dampness, dryness, in both exterior and interior domains to effect healing (Sierpina, 2005)

ACUPUNCTURE USES

Modern medicine is known to do well in tackling many of the medical issues we face. However, there are some other problems that modern medicine is not effective in dealing with them. Where there is the lack of effectiveness is referred to as 'Effectiveness Gaps' (EGs). LBP, which is a musculoskeletal problem, is affected by EGs. Lower back pain is Britain's leading cause of disability. About £12 billion go down the drain in an effort by the NHS to treat back pain problems (de Campos, 2017). Systematic review literature estimates that, acupuncture, together with other

complementary therapies, is used by 41.1% of UK population. Usage levels peak as high as 90% when sufferers of long-term conditions are considered (Posadzki et al., 2013). National Institute of Care and Excellence (NICE) has acknowledged the effectiveness gaps of chronic pain within the National Health Service. Acupuncture treatment for chronic pain is now recommended in the 2021-2026 NICE guidelines. This recommendation has some strings attached at the moment saying the acupuncture treatment should be delivered only in a community setting. Also the delivery should be done by a band 7 (equivalent or lower) healthcare professional with appropriate training. The course of treatment should be made up of no more than 5 hours of healthcare professional's time (www.nice.org.uk, 2021). All these attached conditions show the timidity or the fear of opening up to the complementary and alternative therapies alongside the modern medicine. However, this initial opening would lead to more participation in acupuncture services.

There is one clear fact on the part of Western Medicine Physicians who, under normal conditions, should refer patients suffering from chronic low back pain to acupuncturists. They do not consider the acupuncturists' services to be important so instead of referring the patients in the acute stage of their pain, the physicians would consider other non-effective methods and drugs before thinking of referring the patients to acupuncturist. Many of these western physicians are skeptical about the acupuncture treatment. They are of the view that acupuncture has practically a placebo effect: improvement of symptoms being observed without an active treatment. Referrals usually done as last resort or never done at all (Sierpina, 2005).

THE EFFICACY OF ACUPUNCTURE TREATMENT

There are risks with acupuncture treatment. However, is such that they can be avoided. Being invasive, acupuncture treatment can puncture an organ to cause pneumothorax and cardiac tamponade. Pneumothorax occurs when air leaks into the space between your lung and the chest wall. Cardiac tamponade happens when there is perforation of the sac and blood or fluids fill the space between the sac that surrounds the heart and the heart muscle. There could also be damage to neural and vascular structures, infection, metal-allergy, local pain, bruising, bleeding or hematoma formation. Hematoma is a localized collection of blood in the tissues of the body outside of the blood vessels (Waltz, 2000). Well-trained acupuncturists can prevent most of the safety concerns.

Modern acupuncture needles are thin and are made of solid surgical stainless steel. In the developed parts of the world, single-use, disposable needles are used in acupuncture treatment. Factory-packaged-and-sealed in sterile conditions needles are used to minimise or avoid infection. The risk of cross-transmission of HIV, hepatitis, or other infectious disease can be eliminated. A study was carried out in 2001 in the United Kingdom. 34,000 acupuncture patients were involved. There were no reports of hospitalization, permanent disability nor death. Most patients reported a sense of relaxation and wellbeing after treatment. It can be said that acupuncture treatment is safe according to the data (MacPherson et al., 2001).

INDICATION and CONTRAINDICATION

Complementary and Alternative Medicine faces the problem of identification by

those who have the power to ease off the weight. The term Evidence Based Medicine is always deployed to nullify the potential of CAM. The definition of the term is: "The practice of evidence-based medicine means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research. By individual clinical expertise we mean the proficiency and judgment that individual clinicians acquire through clinical experience and clinical practice.... By best available external clinical evidence we mean clinically relevant research... Good doctors use both individual clinical expertise and the best available external evidence, and neither alone is enough" (Sackett et al., 2019). Authorities that be, use the evidence base argument to exclude the complementary and alternative medicine from healthcare provision. There is no agreement among the experts who are to decide on the fate of CAM. They end up hiding behind 'lack of research or a randomised-controlled-trials on the part of CAM (Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Select Committee on Science and Technology and Great Britain. Parliament House of Commons, 2010). The World Health Organization has enlisted about 40 different indications for acupuncture. Low back pain is among the list. It is clear that bureaucracy is in the way of many sufferers of chronic low back pain. It is high time acupuncture is considered seriously in the fight against low back pain.

CONTRAINDICATION

Some people are afraid of needle and cannot remain firm for the acupuncturist to apply all the needles for treatment. There are patients, who cannot cooperate because of mental ill health which makes them not suitable for acupuncture. There are also certain local treatments which are avoided because of local infections, loss of skin integrity due to burns or ulcerations. Over the brain or heart or in the region of implanted electrical device electroacupuncture is avoided. Normal acupuncture uses single needle and the electroacupuncture uses two needles at each treatment point.

RELATIVE CONTRAINDICATION

During pregnancy, acupuncture is not contraindicated but acupuncturist must be well-trained. Points that can stimulate uterine contractility must be avoided. Acupuncture during menses is relatively contraindicated as it may not be effective during this period. Patients with allergy to metal, patients taking anticoagulant drugs and those with certain bleeding disorders must be considered on a case-by-case basis (Sierpina, 2005).

EFFECTIVENESS OF ACUPUNCTURE

Modern medicine has done and is still doing its part in tackling many health issues that we face today. However, it must be admitted not all areas are effectively covered. Low back pain, a musculoskeletal problem, remains uncovered by modern medicine. Acupuncture is a model so different from the standard medical model that, the Western-trained physicians and students are being implored to hold a temporary suspension of disbelief and learn about acupuncture as a system of medicine. Acupuncture is effective, safe, and cost-effective for treating several chronic pain conditions when performed by well-trained acupuncturist (Yin, Buchheit and Park, 2017).

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