

Can a millennia-old
Chinese healing art
help solve Baltimore's
substance abuse crisis?

BY GREG HANSCOM PHOTOGRAPH BY CORY DONOVAN hey gather on a corner in West Baltimore's Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood early on a hazy August morning. A cluster of gray-haired guys, up from South Baltimore, smoke cigarettes on the sidewalk. Across the street, a couple of young men slouch atop a brick half-wall. A man named Steve sits on a nearby stoop, a red cap shading his weather-worn face. They're all here for their fix.

At nine o'clock the doors open, and the motley group files into the Penn North Neighborhood Center and up the stairs, signing in before taking seats in rings of chairs in a drab conference room. A guy sitting along the back wall asks the gathering crowd if anyone wants to buy a vial of "special oils" from a lime-green Geico bag in his lap. "I got White Diamond, Pattie LaBelle, and Lick Me All Over," he says.

Steve sits with his back to the wall near the door, watching a big ox of a man everyone calls Mark walk to the water cooler. "How you doin'?" Steve asks.

"I'm all fucked up," Mark says. He starts to laugh, but Steve doesn't let him brush it off: "I know," Steve says. "I was observin'."

Mark loses his grin. He tells Steve he bottomed out a few days back; he decided to go to the VA Hospital and get some Prozac and painkillers. "I thought about it," he says, "but I decided not to."

Instead, he came back here, to Penn North (so named because it sits at the intersection of Pennsylvania and North avenues), a facility for recovering addicts that takes an unorthodox approach to managing addiction. Penn North is a project of the 34-year-old Tai Sophia Institute in Laurel, a school that offers masters degrees in acupuncture and herbal medicine. Opened in 1995, Penn North offers an array of treatments ranging from Narcotics Anonymous meetings to acupuncture, massage, and reiki, a Japanese relaxation and healing technique. Natalie Mercer, a former youth minister who signs people in each morning and coordinates the center's HIV/AIDS education program, teaches a weekly recovery class centered around the seven principles of the African American festival of Kwanzaa.

It's one small front in the battle against one of Baltimore's most unshakable ills: The city is home to an estimated 45,000 to 85,000 addicts, and their addictions feed a host of other problems, from domestic violence to sky-high rates of incarceration. Penn North's backers say the approach is working and is bringing treatments that were once dismissed as New Age crystal worship to the gritty world of the city streets.

Robert Duggan, an acupuncturist and Tai Sophia co-founder, says that unlike traditional methadone and buprenorphine treatments that substitute one narcotic for another, the techniques at Penn North don't promise to take the pain away. The thrust of the program is to help addicts recognize the triggers that make them want their drugs and learn to deal with those yearnings in positive ways. "Everybody in Baltimore is addicted," Duggan says. "They're addicted to Starbucks, to their wife's affections, to their children. Our goal is not to stop people from being addicted. It is to move people from nonfunctional to functional addictions."

This morning's treatment is an odd hybrid of a twelve-step meeting and a meditation session. It begins when acupuncturist Rhonda Sapp Armero, dressed in pink-rimmed glasses and jacked-up black shoes, rings a bell three times slowly. The crowd quiets. "Today is August 15, 2008, the only one you will ever see," Armero says. She reads an inspirational quote about "getting unstuck," tells the roughly forty people in the room to "take this opportunity to find your yin," and leads them in a breathing exercise. The group recites the Serenity Prayer. Then the needles come out.

Armero and three helpers carefully insert five hair-thin needles into the ears of everyone in the room. "Get your ears pierced. They's nothing to it," Steve coaches a first-timer. "What really helps is the breathing. When the pins go in, you exhale."

As the needle workers make the rounds, a young guy named Kevin, his hair braided into tight cornrows, watches and grimaces. When Armero reaches him, he tenses and taps his heel nervously. Armero tells him to loosen up. "Did you have breakfast?" she asks.

In 2004, infants of Cuban mothers had **THE LOWEST** infant mortality rates in the country.

"Yeah."

"Did you have sugar? I bet you had coffee with lots of sugar."

"The sugar and the pins don't mix," Steve explains. "They gonna be fightin' each other."

With ears around the room bristling with needles, the acupuncturists turn off the lights and leave. Flute and harp music plays from a portable radio. With the exception of Kevin, who looks around restlessly, everyone is still. The older guys who had been smoking outside share a newspaper. A fit fortysomething man in a pressed tropical print shirt closes his eyes and rests his upturned wrists on his knees as if he is meditating. A couple of guys fall asleep, and one snores, winning a slap from a woman sitting a few seats down. A roomful of tired faces seems to find reprieve.

When the lights come back on after about an hour and the acupuncturists remove the pins from people's ears, most of the attendees seem to be in no rush to leave. They talk or just sit quietly.

Acupuncture is a millennia-old Chinese practice that claims to heal by activating points along "energy pathways" in the body. It has been dismissed as quackery by some in the Western medical establishment. While acupuncture has been shown to temporarily relieve pain, there is no solid evidence that it can treat disease or cure addiction, says University of Maryland biostatistics professor R. Barker Bausell, who wrote the 2007 book Snake Oil Science: The Truth About Complementary and Alternative Medicine. Bausell spent five years as research director at the university's Center for Integrative Medicine. He says conducting a clean, rigorous study on acupuncture is almost impossible. Coming up with a placebo is difficult because it's hard to convince someone you're poking him with needles if you're not. People who take part in acupuncture trials also tend to be self-selected, meaning that they believe from the outset that it can help them. "The placebo effect automatically kicks in," Bausell says.

A major literature review conducted by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1997 found that it was hard to conclude anything about acupuncture's effectiveness because so much of the research was complicated by study design, sample size, and other factors. Last year, at a conference at the University of Maryland marking the tenth anniversary of the NIH review, researchers reported that while the quality and quantity of acupuncture studies had increased, the results to date were largely mixed or inconclusive.

The difficulty in measuring acupuncture's proclaimed benefits doesn't seem to be hurting its popularity. According to the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the NIH, 8.2 million adults in the United States have tried acupuncture. In Baltimore, the Center for Integrative Medicine is now experimenting with acupuncture at the Shock Trauma Center, an icon of invasive Western-style emergency medicine. The study's leader and head of the university's traditional Chinese medicine research program, Dr. Lixing Lao, says preliminary results suggest that acupuncture is helping relieve acute pain. The biological explanation holds that the needles cause the body to produce glucocorticoid hormones that reduce inflammation, as well as endorphins that suppress the sensation of pain.

With drug addiction, the theory is that the needles cause the brain to release an endorphin that mimics the neurotransmitter

"Everybody in Baltimore is addicted," says Robert Duggan, an acupuncturist and Tai Sophia co-founder. "They're addicted to Starbucks, to their wife's affections, to their children. Our goal is not to stop people from being addicted. It is to move people from nonfunctional to functional addictions."

dopamine, relieving patients' cravings. A 1999 Boston University study found that acupuncture patients were 29 percent less likely to be readmitted into detox programs within six months than those who underwent more traditional treatment, but its authors acknowledged that the study was limited because its subjects were self-selected. Nonetheless, between seven hundred and a thousand acupuncture addiction programs have sprung up nationwide, according to the nonprofit National Acupuncture Detoxification Association.

Acupuncturists at the Tai Sophia Institute began using needles to treat addicts in the Baltimore Women's Detention Center in 1993. The school's students, supervised by certified acupuncturists, still do most of the treatment at Penn North. The patients are referred from a long list of treatment centers and detox programs around the city, as well as from the court system. Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems, the quasi-public nonprofit that doles out public funds for drug treatment, will provide \$450,000 for Penn North this year. Duggan says the facility serves six thousand people annually; seventy to eighty receive acupuncture there each day.

Some of them walk away believers. "The first time I did full-body acupuncture, I hate to use the term, but I felt high," says a Penn North client named Lillie. "It was like nothing in the world was wrong with me."

Lillie says she is here because her doctors gave up on her. "Now, I'm looking at me in a more thorough way," she says. "I'm looking at health in a different way. I had to make some really serious changes—not just physical, but spiritual, mental."

continued on page 109

The Fix continued from page 65

"When you're making the decision to let go of drugs, everything has to change: the friends, the places you've spent your time," says Armero, who has a private practice called About Chi Acupuncture in Fells Point. "Every aspect of your life has to change." She says the five needles used in ear, or auricular, treatment help the body flush out toxins and establish a new, healthy balance. They also help patients connect with "something in the world that's bigger than you," she says, and regain control of their lives.

"After using drugs for so many years, their mind is out of control," says Vernard Nelson, Penn North's program manager and team leader. "The needles help get their mindset back in order." Nelson was first introduced to acupuncture when he was in prison, serving time for a drug charge. Since he started with the needles, he says he has gone back to heroin and crack only once. That was eleven years ago.

Stories like Nelson's are not uncommon at Penn North. A 2001 study conducted by the nonprofit Center for Social Research found that people entering the treatment program had been arrested an average of fifteen times over the preceding eleven years. Ninety-seven percent of the people who left the program stayed out of trouble for the five months that followed. Something seems to be working here, though it is not clear whether it is the needles, the Narcotics Anonymous meetings, or some combination of things.

Bob Duggan suggests, only half kidding, that the healing power at Penn North is in Natalie Mercer's smile as she greets patients filing in from the street each morning. "Heroin is a very faithful friend," Duggan says. "If you want me off heroin, you better build me a community of friends. This is a place where people know they have community day or night."

Kevin, the young guy with cornrows who fidgeted during the acupuncture treatment, says his first round of addiction "treatment" for heroin came courtesy of the prison system: "I had to go cold turkey," he says. "Nothin' for thirty days. I had to dry out." He was later referred to a prison treatment program, then sent to Penn North by a judge in drug court.

Asked if he thinks acupuncture helps, he says, flat out, "Hell no." He attributes his ability to stay clean to his determination and a "higher power." But then he admits that acupuncture has helped him face the root of his addiction. "I don't like pain. Any kind of pain, I try to run from," he says. He hates the needles, he says. He snorted heroin rather than injecting it. "But here, I haven't run from the pain."

Asked if he will come back to Penn North after his courtordered treatment, Kevin doesn't hesitate. "Yeah," he says. "It's part of my life now. It helps me stay together." ■

—Greg Hanscom is Urbanite's senior editor. His wife, Tara Thomas, is a student in the herbal medicine program at Tai Sophia.

Web extra: Footage from the Penn North Neighborhood Center at www.urbanitebaltimore.com

Boys.

We know how they **think**. We know how they **learn**. It's what we **do**.

OPEN HOUSE ~ SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19 Middle and Upper School at 11:00 a.m. Lower School at 2:30 p.m.

LOWER SCHOOL VISITING DAYS

November 13 and January 8 from 8:15-9:30 a.m.



THE BOYS' LATIN SCHOOL OF MARYLAND

822 West Lake Avenue | Baltimore, Maryland 21210 410.377.5192 | www.boyslatinmd.com

