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Proponents claim acupuncture removes drug cravings without substituting one drug for another.



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MULTIPLY PIERCED: TAI SOPHIA INSTITUTE'S DAVID WURZEL APPLIES ACUPUNCTURE THERAPY TO A CLIENT RECOVERING FROM DRUG ADDICTION.

Prick Up Your Ears

Health Initiative Uses Alternative Medicine to Heal Substance Abusers' Bodies and Minds

By Jill Yesko

The 30 men and women in the overheated, lavender-hued conference room at the Tai Sophia Institute's Penn North Neighborhood Center are all ears. Seated in two concentric circles in various states of repose, the group, composed of illegal-drug and other substance abusers, is getting ready for a daily acupuncture treatment. The 45-minute session consists of

strategically placing five half-inch-long acupuncture needles, which are about the thickness of two human hairs, into each person's ears. Once in place, the needles are supposed to take away drug cravings by calming the nervous system, while detoxing the body and mind.

The needles, referred to in the program as "pins" to avoid any negative connotations, resemble shiny, miniature pick-up sticks. They are placed in the patients' ears because the ears are easy to access and because "pins remind you that you do have the ability to overcome from within," says Tai Sophia Institute staff member David Wurzel. Wurzel is a licensed acupuncturist and director of

Maryland Community Health Initiatives, a nonprofit that oversees Tai Sophia's patient-care programs.

Walking around the room, Wurzel and four acupuncture students from the Tai Sophia Institute—a Laurel-based school that offers professional training in acupuncture, botanical healing, and "applied healing arts"—gently whisper "exhale" into patients' ears before inserting the needles. A sign on the wall warns against removing shoes, in case of fallen needles. After several minutes, the room fills with snores, sighs, and drooping heads—signs of relaxation as the patients experience a sense of release. Proponents of this

treatment, which is known as “acudetox,” claim that, unlike methadone and other conventional drug-treatment protocols, acupuncture removes drug cravings without substituting one drug for another. Rather, they say, it supports healing by opening blocked energy channels to the body, mind, and spirit.

The Penn North acudetox program began in 1996 as a pilot program fueled by a \$150,000 startup grant from the Abell Foundation. The bulk of the patients (about 65 percent, Wurzel says) are part of the I Can’t We Can program, a one-year substance-abuse recovery program that serves more than 250 city residents. The rest are walk-ins or referrals from residential treatment facilities and city agencies. To date, the Tai Sophia-administered acudetox program has treated more than 5,000 people for addictions ranging from heroin to crack-cocaine to OxyContin. The majority of the cost for the program is picked up by the Tai Sophia Institute, which has contributed more than \$1.4 million to it over the past eight years. The center also expects to receive funding from the city Health Department in the near future to offset some of its expenses.

Participants are asked to voluntarily commit to at least 30 sessions (about three months) of “wellness-based” treatment. The full wellness protocol lasts six months and, in addition to acupuncture, includes classes in meditation, t’ai chi, nutrition, parenting, and life skills based on African principles. Patients also receive massage sessions and can gradually progress to whole-body acupuncture treatments. Those who complete six months of treatment receive a certificate of completion at a small graduation ceremony.

“This is a treatment that heals from the inside so that counseling can be more effective,” Wurzel says. He estimates that nationwide there are about 1,000 programs that incorporate acudetox into drug-treatment regimens. Tai Sophia’s Penn North program combines its wellness-based treatment with conventional approaches, such as case management and counseling, performed by state-licensed addictions counselors.

In a city with an estimated 55,000 illegal-drug users, only a scant third of which

seek treatment, success is measured in small doses rather than in leaps and bounds. According to a 2001 study conducted by the Silver Spring-based Center for Social Research and commissioned by the Tai Sophia Institute, more than 30 percent of Penn North’s participating patients elected to complete the three-month program—an impressive statistic compared with the sky-high dropout and recidivism rates for most conventional drug-treatment programs. The study also found that 97 percent of the people who participated in the program had no additional arrest charges during the five months following their involvement with the center.

“For over half the people that come here, this is their first serious commitment to treatment,” Wurzel says. He says that using acudetox in conjunction with other holistic therapies is more cost effective than conventional treatments. Wurzel estimates it costs about \$300 per person for the full six-month Acudetox protocol. City-run methadone treatments, which may also include counseling and other support programs, cost between \$3,300 and \$3,500 per patient per year, according to Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems, a nonprofit agency that tracks program costs. “What’s important in comparing our treatment to methadone is that we are building community and relationships, not just performing a procedure,” Wurzel says.

In the near future, Wurzel hopes to expand the program to include a pilot program that will use herbs to treat people infected with hepatitis C. “Ninety percent of all Baltimore City [intravenous] drug users are hepatitis C positive,” says Wurzel. Some believe that botanical preparations used for hepatitis C don’t have as many side effects as the currently prescribed allopathic medications.

Using herbs in conjunction with acupuncture to treat addictions is a natural match says Kevin Spelman, a professional herbalist and a founding faculty member of the botanical healing program at the Tai Sophia Institute. Spelman says that poor nutritional habits coupled with the depleting effects of drugs overtaxes patients’ central nervous systems, causing irritability and depression. Herbs can

help decrease the physiological stresses that are associated with drug withdrawal, he says. Spelman hopes that by the end of the year he will be using herbs specifically tailored to the unique needs of those who have hepatitis C.

Tai Sophia also uses other methods to help addicts help themselves. “Drug use creates black spots in people’s memories,” says David Ison, who teaches classes in meditation at the Penn North Neighborhood Center and at the National Institutes of Health. Ison says meditation, which is also an important part of the Penn North treatment program, is a useful tool that helps addicts deal with the triggers that cause cravings for drugs.

For Edmondson Village resident Fred Burns, enrolling in the Penn North center has been a transforming experience. “To me, this is like a gift,” says Burns, 48, who started abusing drugs and alcohol when he was 18. Now a t’ai chi enthusiast, Burns says he practices this ancient Chinese form of meditation in motion whenever he can.

“Acupuncture takes away all of that urge [for drugs],” continues Burns, who says he has been clean since October. “You just feel very relaxed.”