

POINTS OF LIGHT

Acupuncture helps addicts on the road to recovery.

BY RON CASSIE



AT 9:30 ON A RECENT Friday morning, two dozen men and women walk up the stairs of a nondescript gray building in the 2400 block of Pennsylvania Avenue. Taking seats among the two circles of folding chairs, some chit-chat, others keep to themselves, and a few fidget until acupuncturist Rhonda Sapp Armero enters the room.

She greets the Penn North Neighborhood Center clients—who are between 25 and 55 years old—and shares a story about the smashed car windows, stolen money, and slashed tires she recently endured.

“I kept saying a mantra to myself that my therapist had given me the day before: ‘Thank you very much, I have no complaints today; thank you very much, I have no complaints today,’” Armero tells the group. “I was okay. That kind of pain or difficulty is something we are going to have to deal with,” she says. “What we do with it is up to us.”

Armero’s clients are also in pain, and the center, sponsored by the nonprofit Tai Sophia Institute’s Maryland Community Health Initiative, aims to help them deal with it as constructively as possible. Penn North mainly treats drug addicts referred by Baltimore drug courts and other city agencies, but also accepts walk-ins.

After sharing her story, Armero leads the group through the Serenity Prayer. Without prompting, clients wipe their ears with tiny alcohol pads, preparing for Armero or her student assistant to place five tiny needles in each ear.

As the lights go down, soft music is turned on. Armero reminds everyone that fall is arriving, the leaves will be changing soon, and that it’s important to take deep breaths and notice these things. Fifteen minutes later, nearly everyone has closed their eyes and folded their hands—a couple appear to have fallen asleep. It is a quiet, 45-minute daily break in stark contrast to the chaotic clatter of the street below.

“Acupuncture helps me sleep at night and focus better throughout the day,” 48-year-old Gary Adams says afterwards. He started using cocaine and heroin a decade ago, but is clean today. “It gives us clarity of mind so that our mind is not just racing around all over.”

Penn North team leader and manager Vernard Nelson, who has been working at the center for 11 years, is a testament to the success of so-called auricular acupuncture drug treatment. He first received the treatments in the Baltimore City jail more than a dozen years ago. After he completed the program and was released, he began dealing drugs again—as planned, he says—and started using six months later. Again, he was arrested. He didn’t waste his second chance.

“The second time, I was looking at 15 years in prison [for] heroin and cocaine charges when I was offered drug court,” the 6-foot-6, 310-pound Nelson recounts. “That’s when I started the acupuncture treatment again.” Clean for 11 years, he smiles and notes that it was

Left: Patient receiving treatment at Penn North; Top right: Group therapy.

Armero, the senior acupuncturist at Penn North, then a Tai Sophia graduate student, who was “the first person to stick needles in me.”

He continues once-a-week acupuncture to this day.

The 5,000-year-old Chinese treatment has been used to help improve the body’s natural functions, promote healing and manage pain—and, since the mid-’70s, to treat drug addiction and alcoholism. In 1993, acupuncture was introduced as a treatment component inside the Baltimore City Detention Center by the Laurel-based Tai Sophia, and its use has been spreading statewide in treating addiction.

Over the last several years, Glass Health Programs, the largest provider of methadone treatment in the city, added acupuncture as a treatment option, and so has the private Columbia Addictions Center in Howard County. Two years ago, Montgomery County, at the urging of Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg, a former social worker with an addiction treatment background, introduced acupuncture into the county’s health department protocol for treating drug addiction.

Both Baltimore City Circuit Court Judge Gale E. Rasin, a former drug court judge, and District Court Judge Jamey H. Hueston, who currently presides over the adult drug-treatment court program, are strong acupuncture advocates.

“I wanted to find out what it was about, since I was sending people there, so I volunteered, getting acupuncture three or four times in the jail myself,” Hueston says. “It’s very relaxing and actually helps any kind of addiction, such as eating disorders and smoking. I thought it was fantastic. The participants speak very highly about the reduced cravings and increased confidence [in their recovery]. It’s another tool. I’m a big fan.”

Judge Hueston says anyone going through Circuit and District drug courts is eligible for acupuncture treatment and both judges say they’d like to see acupuncture more widely used to help addicts recover and adapt to re-entry.

According to Dr. Michael O. Smith, the leading expert in the field

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of acudetox and director of the Lincoln Recovery Center, an outpatient chemical dependency treatment program in the South Bronx, the discovery of acupuncture in treating addiction was made in the early 1970s by Hong Kong neurologist Hsiang-Lai Wen. While using acupuncture to assist anesthesia, Wen realized that surgery patients who were also addicted to opiates experienced a significant reduction in withdrawal symptoms following acupuncture.

“What he observed as part of his analysis after surgery,” Smith says, “is that among gun-shot victims, for example, there are also a lot of drug users. And those he had treated with acupuncture didn’t ask for pain medication afterwards. Drug users *always* asked for pain medication.”

The benefit of acupuncture, says Bob Duggan, president of the



34-year-old Tai Sophia Institute, is not that it is a cure for addiction—that still doesn’t exist—but that it enables addicts to cope with the long, arduous process of recovery by relieving withdrawal symptoms, cravings, and anxiety.

“Acupuncture allows people to become more relaxed and aware of their body,” Duggan says. “It can calm the brain from panic that would otherwise be overwhelming and works in the context of all the other support—NA meetings, meditation, one-on-one counseling, Tai Chi classes, G.E.D. classes, and life skills classes.”

The most comprehensive study of auricular acupuncture’s effectiveness is a 1999 report led by Dr. Michael Schwartz, a Boston University professor of health care and operation management. Comparing results of 6,907 clients who did not receive acupuncture as part of their treatment versus 1,014 who did, the study found the odds of an acupuncture client being readmitted to detox was 29 percent less than someone receiving traditional care.

Schwartz, who was skeptical of acupuncture prior to the study, concluded, “acupuncture detoxification programs are a useful component of a substance-abuse system.”

Dr. Lixing Lao, director of the traditional Chinese medicine program at the University of Maryland’s Center for Integrated Medicine, uses acupuncture to treat pain at the Maryland Shock Trauma Center. He says if acupuncture can mimic opiates in relieving

pain, it makes sense it could relieve cravings for narcotics.

“There are lots of studies that show acupuncture works well for pain,” Lao says. “Cocaine is used for treating pain, opiates are used to treat pain, and this may work on similar neurological pathways and receptors. It corresponds that acupuncture can help the body deal with drug addiction.”

For Adams, a former truck driver who lives at the Seton Hill transitional shelter, starting acupuncture in April has helped him remain clean—and deal with underlying issues, such as anger management—that he ignored in the past.

“I’ll always be an addict. But it’s not the drugs that are the problem, it’s me,” Adams says. “Things have started coming together so I can do everything I need to do to get my life back.”