In the West, Acupuncture is still very much seen as an alternative approach to healthcare - something that clients often turn to as a last resort, when they have exhausted every avenue open to them by conventional medicine.

In China, however, acupuncture is a highly respected medical practice, and has played a major role in primary healthcare for over 3,000 years - along with herbalism, moxabustion, meditation, massage, exercise and dietary therapy. Collectively, these various therapies are referred to as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM): a sophisticated, over-arching healthcare system designed to cure illness and maintain health and well-being.

It is believed that acupuncture was first discovered by physicians attending the battlefield: with increasing regularity, they noticed that soldiers were ‘cured’ of old injuries or chronic ailments when wounded by arrows. After documenting precisely where the arrows had pierced the soldiers’ skin, the physicians then began to experiment by sticking fish bones and splinters of stone into specific areas of the body. Several millennia later, over 1,000 acupuncture points have been identified, and (happily) fine, disposable needles are used instead of animal bones, bamboo splinters and flint!

**The underlying principles**

In order to appreciate how acupuncture works, one first has to have a basic knowledge of the underlying principles …

**The concept of Qi**

Traditional Chinese Medicine is based upon the theory that everything in the universe - both natural and man-made - is composed of a ‘vital energy’ known as Qi (pronounced “chee” and often written as “Chi”). Qi is believed to flow through the human body in a concentrated form along 12 major meridians or ‘channels’. Practitioners of TCM, including Acupuncturists, believe that when Qi is free-flowing and balanced within the body, we remain in good health. If, however, Qi becomes blocked, impaired, or imbalanced, then mental, emotional and/or physical illness will follow.

The Meridians

Each of the 12 major meridians that carry Qi throughout the body correspond to (and are named after) a particular organ, namely: the lung, spleen, heart, kidney, pericardium (heart protector/ sex meridian), liver, large intestine, small intestine, stomach, bladder, san jiao (three heater), and gall bladder. There are also a number of ‘acupuncture points’ dotted along each meridian. These acupuncture points can be likened to miniature vortices or ‘energy whirlpools’ through which Qi can be drawn into or out of the body. Simply applying pressure to a specific acupuncture point is enough to alter the flow of Qi, which in turn can bring about physical changes (e.g. relief from a headache). By using acupuncture needles, this technique is simply more precise and the results amplified.

**Making a diagnosis**

Before treatment can begin, the Acupuncturist needs to establish where in the body Qi is in a state of disharmony. S/he will effectively make a diagnosis based upon the information gained from the following types of examination:

- **looking**
  What build is the client? How do they move? Is the face, pale, puffy or red? Is the skin dry, itchy, or swollen? Are the eyes bright, tired, bloodshot? Is the tongue moist, dry, or discoloured?
• **hearing and smelling**
  Is the client’s voice loud or soft? Is s/he quiet or talkative? Is the breathing laboured or raspy? Does the breath or body odour smell unpleasant?

• **questioning**
  What areas of the client’s body are affected by symptoms (e.g., ears, trunk, head)? Are there problems relating to: digestion; bowels; bladder; sleep? Is the client in pain? What is his/her emotional state? What is his/her environment and lifestyle like? Does she menstruate regularly/heavily?

• **touching**
  Does the skin feel hot or cold to the touch? Is the skin dry or moist? Are any of the major acupuncture points painful to the touch?

Pulse reading is also considered to be an important diagnostic technique used by Acupuncturists. Whereas a Doctor of Western medicine might check a patient’s pulse rate (number of beats per minute), Acupuncturists will also take into account the pulse width, strength, quality, and rhythm - from three different pulses on each arm.

The treatment

Once the Acupuncturist has obtained all of the necessary information outlined above, s/he can then determine which meridians require attention. Various acupuncture points along these affected meridians can then be stimulated with needles in order to restore the balance and flow of Qi within the body.

Needles may be inserted vertically, at an angle or horizontally, just under the skin or several centimetres deep, depending on the particular acupuncture point and how near the meridian is to the surface of the skin. The needles may be inserted and extracted almost immediately, or left in for up to half an hour. The Acupuncturist may choose to manipulate the needles by hand, or use small electrodes in order to stimulate the acupuncture points. Much will depend on the training received by the Acupuncturist (those who have been taught the TCM/The Eight Principles approach will arguably be using the most traditional diagnostic techniques and methods, as practiced by the ancient Chinese).

The Acupuncturist will often insert needles into areas of the body that seem to bear no relation to the symptoms being experienced. For instance, s/he may insert needles behind the knee of a client who is complaining of frequent headaches. This is because, having carried out a full diagnosis, the Acupuncturist may believe that the headaches stem from a liver imbalance. By stimulating the relevant acupuncture point along the liver meridian (e.g., behind the knee), it is hoped that Qi will be restored in this particular area, and thus the headaches will cease. It is a question of treating the cause which in turn will then address the symptom.

What conditions acupuncture may benefit

There are a number of complaints and conditions that acupuncture has been claimed to benefit in certain individuals, including:

- Headaches; arthritis; fibromyalgia; stress; depression; back pain; sports injuries; morning sickness; labour pains; gynaecological/sexual problems; menopausal symptoms; ME; irritable bowel syndrome; asthma; pain in general.

However, Traditional Chinese Medicine supports the view that ‘prevention is better than cure’, and thus it [cont...]

[...] is considered wise to have periodic acupuncture treatments, just to maintain optimum health. Indeed, in The Hamlyn Encyclopedia of Complementary Health, Stuart Lightbody comments: “To the Chinese, a sick man visiting an acupuncturist is comparable to a thirsty man starting to dig a well”.  

**Contra-indications to treatment**

There are very few contra-indications to treatment. However, clients should not be treated if they:

- have a haemophilic condition
- have recently consumed alcohol or drugs
- are pregnant (certain acupuncture points and needle manipulations are contra-indicated).

Certain acupuncture points should be avoided if the client is using anticoagulant medication such as warfarin. The use of electrodes to stimulate inserted needles should also be avoided if clients are fitted with cardiac pacemakers.

**How it works: Qi … or endorphins?**

Understanding and accepting a concept such as ‘Qi’ is rather like believing in a God: it requires faith rather than scientific proof - something which sits a little uncomfortably with Westerners, the majority of whom prefer a more ‘black and white’ approach to life, involving blood counts and x-rays. For these people, there is the following ‘scientific’ explanation as to how acupuncture works: “it stimulates nerves in the skin and muscle, sending impulses to nerve cells in the central nervous system to produce a variety of effects on the body’s hormones, nervous system, muscle tone, circulation and immune system, and stimulating the release of substances such as natural opiates (endorphins) that can relieve pain or anti-inflammatory substances.”

But however it works, Acupuncture is clearly one of the most popular and widely recognised alternative therapies in the UK. According to The Which? Guide to Complementary Therapies, “Acupuncture has been assessed in more trials than almost any other complementary therapy,” and ‘medical’ acupuncture is being practised by some 4,000 Doctors and Physiotherapists in the UK. The Government is also in the process of formulating statutory regulation for acupuncture and herbal medicine [see below]. All of the above indicates that acupuncture is finally gaining the respect of the medical profession, the Government, and the general public. May other alternative and complementary therapies soon follow in its footsteps …

**A note concerning statutory regulation**

In March 2004, the Department of Health published “Regulation of herbal medicine and acupuncture: proposals for statutory regulation”. The key issues discussed in this document include: the type of regulatory body; who will be eligible to register with the regulatory body; projected annual fees; protection of title; conduct of practitioners; and fitness to practice. If you are practising or studying acupuncture, you would be well advised to obtain a copy of these proposals from the Department of Health on: Tel. 0113 254 6786. Alternatively, download a copy from: www.dh.gov.uk/Consultations/LiveConsultations/fs/en.

**References/ further reading**

2 Williams, Tom (2003): Complete Illustrated Guide to Chinese Medicine; Published by Thorsons. ISBN: 0-00-713003-1  

*[In China, where Health and Safety Regulations regarding the use of sharps are not as stringent as in the UK, sterilised needles are often used instead of disposable needles.]*