

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE ACQUIRING MAINSTREAM RESPECT

Demand for non-invasive, non-pharmaceutical techniques is growing



Acupuncturists treat children as well as adults. According to Balaban, young people are particularly responsive to the treatment.

BY LUIZA GRUNEBAUM

The pain in Laura Hollin's back was getting worse. The dull ache she was experiencing by day was beginning to keep her up at night. It was becoming harder to get out of bed in the morning; she had to position herself in just the right way to stave off the pain. Her doctor had given her medication, but she didn't want to take pills. Yoga, swimming and stretching hadn't helped much at all. Then her friend told her, "You've tried everything else, now try acupuncture." After three months of treatment, the former Ft. Lee resident says the discomfort is gone. "I never even think about my back anymore," she says. "I feel like I've been put back together."

Acupuncture, a part of traditional Chinese medicine, is one of the oldest healing disciplines in the world. Acupuncture practitioners stimulate specific points on the body – usually by inserting needles through the skin. Proponents believe this regulates the

flow of qi (energy) along pathways known as meridians. Still a skeptic? Well, Harvard Medical School offers an acupuncture training course for its physicians, and the National Institute of Health has declared the practice effective for specific conditions. Endorsements like these have led some insurance companies to cover acupuncture treatment.

Israeli Mor Balaban was sure she was going to medical school until a trip to the Far East introduced her to acupuncture and herbal medicine. A longtime sufferer of chronic headaches, Balaban opted to visit an acupuncturist back home. Most clinics in Israel offer complementary and alternative medicine options such as acupuncture and herbal remedies.

"After eight sessions, I was migraine-free."

The treatment not only eliminated Balaban's headaches, it also changed the course of her life. She began looking into schools that taught acupuncture,

and became convinced that the best were located here in the U.S. In 2006, Balaban graduated from Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in NYC and established her practice in Tenafly, a practice she has seen flourish in the last few years as acupuncture has become an increasingly viable option for those seeking help outside the realm of conventional medicine. In fact, says Balaban, more and more doctors are referring their patients to acupuncturists for specific conditions, including pain management and infertility.

Balaban herself sees patients across the medical spectrum. It could be a skin condition or allergies, autoimmune disease or asthma. Sinusitis sufferers knock on her door, as do those afflicted with sleeplessness.

"I see everything from a runny nose to cancer," says Balaban.

However, that doesn't mean all those engaged in the profession are the same.

"There are different techniques," explains Balaban. "Each practitioner has his or her own way, and you have to factor in that practitioner's energy. Some are gentle, some use more force."

But what accounts for the relief that so many of those treated with acupuncture seem to achieve? Balaban believes that releasing endorphins into the body has a lot to do with it. Endorphins are anti-pain hormones that are found in the central nervous system. Research has demonstrated that acupuncture releases these morphine-like substances, which can be effective in ameliorating discomfort.

Children, Balaban emphasizes, are by no means exempt from the benefits of acupuncture; in fact, young people comprise a significant percentage of Balaban's patient base. She says many parents come to her "frustrated" by their experience with conventional medicine. Moms and dads are frequently looking for a way to take their children off steroids and other drugs they don't consider safe.

"In pediatrics," says Balaban, "we see tremendous results. Kids respond so quickly." Children with ADD and ADHD, in Balaban's experience, can

improve considerably when treated with needles. In fact,

Balaban is also a board-certified herbalist who oftentimes incorporates the medicinal use of plants into her treatment protocol. Although she works primarily with Chinese herbs such as dong quai, Balaban also believes in the benefits of western herbs ashwaganda, kava kava and St. John's Wort, which are used primarily for mood enhancement. The acupuncturist has confidence in antioxidants grape seed extract, which she says is helpful in treating autism and psoriasis. The formulas that Balaban works with are derived from Chinese herbs grown in the United States, because, she says, American standards of purity are higher. The herbs are cooked and soaked in alcohol, and are highly concentrated.

"What makes Chinese medicine different," explains Balaban, "is that there is room for creativity. We're able to tailor an herbal formula for patients with his or her specific needs in mind."

One of Balaban's patients, a four year old child, was afflicted with a chronic cough that an array of specialists could not seem to treat. "We were desperate," said his mother, an Englewood radiologist who asked that her name not be revealed. "Western medicine was not helping."

Balaban treated the child with acupuncture and today he is cough-free. It was very rewarding for Balaban and a great relief to the child's family. Before acupuncture, said the mother, "we were all suffering."

And Hollin says that living without pain is something she's gotten used to very quickly. For a long time, Hollin had adjusted her life to the limitations that a bad back engenders, but now she is actively engaged in her life, without the physical and emotional distress that plagued her for years.

"I still go to doctors," says Hollin. "I haven't eschewed Western medicine. But I believe one approach can live comfortably alongside the other."

"And you know what? My acupuncturist believes that, too."



Mor Balaban treats a patient in her offices in Tenafly.



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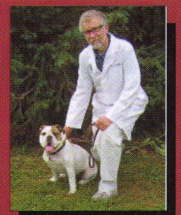
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