

Acupuncture Research: strategies for establishing an evidence base

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This is a well crafted and scholarly book, extensively referenced. It was developed from a collaborative workshop held in York in 2006; this personal interaction has ensured a degree of cohesion between the chapters which is unusual in an edited book of this type. The wide range of backgrounds of the contributors has caused them to develop a rich synthesis.

A thoughtful comparison is drawn between the focus of Asian medicine on the non-replicable patient experience, and the evidence based approach of biomedicine. The latter requires analysis of large numbers of cases in order to establish the best treatment for the 'average patient'. Cultural differences in the understanding of acupuncture mechanisms are also discussed. An attempt is made to redefine the Chinese concept of *Qi* in more Western terms, as a 'generative matrix in which all things interact with all other things through the exchange of information (providing) the information needed to maintain the stability of a complex system'.

A history of such research is provided, from its beginnings in Japan in 1905, through Pomeranz's breakthrough studies on endorphins, to the opportunities provided by scan technology in the present day. The problem of defining the placebo effect is discussed in detail. Perhaps the word 'placebo' now has so many alternative meanings that it should be abandoned; other possibilities are the 'context effect' or, specifically for acupuncture, 'non-needling care'. The good results achieved by sham acupuncture in many trials suggest that the non-needling effects may be much more important than previously realised. Physiological effects can be measured from needling anywhere in the body; so is precision in needle placement necessary? And if not, what are the implications for the future of acupuncture training?

The Western 'hierarchy of evidence' model, which was developed in response to the assessment of new drugs, does not lend itself well to the assessment of established therapies. Fønnebo has proposed an alternative model, an 'evidence mosaic', which appears to be more suitable for acupuncture research. Whichever model is used, in order for acupuncture to come of age in the West it needs to be observed through Western lenses. But acupuncture is not a single entity, rather a complex and diverse range of therapies arising from different traditions. In addition, it is an individualised therapy which does not lend itself to the standardisation required by Western methods. It is possible to consider an acupuncture intervention as a 'black box' without attempting to define its contents. This would make the results more representative and generalisable, but it would also make it much harder to attribute success to specific components of the intervention, and thereby to develop the practice. So perhaps there are two different needs to be considered which require different research approaches; the need to establish credibility in the eyes of biomedicine, and the need for acupuncturists to ensure that their patient receives optimal treatment.

Acupuncture research is usually conducted by acupuncturists who know, from their own clinical experience, that it is effective. There is an inherent danger that they will set out to prove that they are right, instead of taking the position of equipoise required for scientific enquiry. Research infrastructure is being developed, although we read that in the United Kingdom (UK) complementary medicine receives only 0.0085% of the health research budget. Despite the funding problems, it has already been demonstrated that acupuncture provides a safe intervention for pain, which for many conditions is well within the limit for cost effectiveness set by the UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). This poses 'a specific and as yet unanswered challenge to the dominance of biomedicine'.

This book will clarify the understanding of anyone who is, or would like to be, involved in strengthening the evidence base for acupuncture.

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