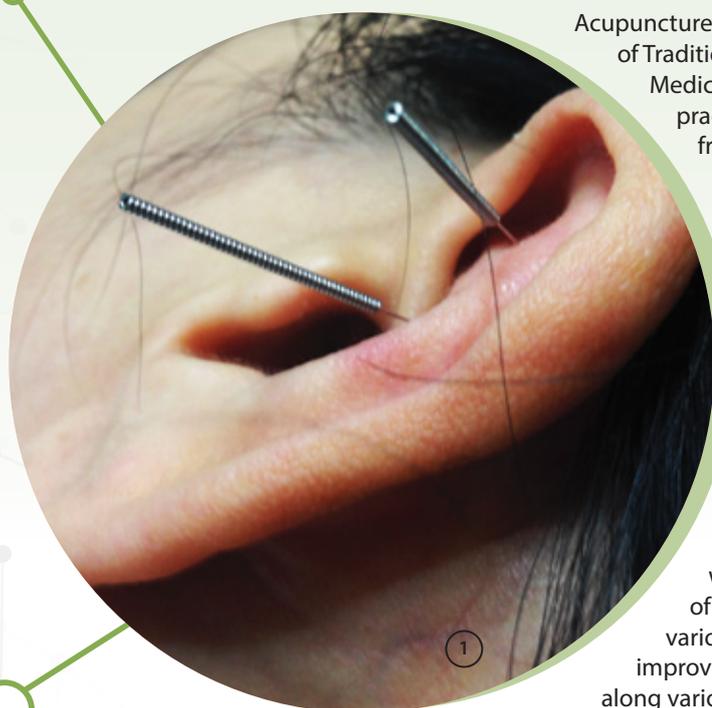


ACUPUNCTURE

in the Management of

ADDICTIONS

Text and photos by Dr Lambert Low



Acupuncture is a branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and the practice originated from China where it has been practised for over 2,000 years. Generally, thin filiform needles are inserted into acupoints found along meridians (energy pathways of the body) and this is coupled with manipulation of the needles via various techniques to improve the flow of "Qi" along various meridians or channels.

In TCM theory, the needling of an acupoint releases the stagnation of "Qi". "Qi" is a life force present in everyone and it flows in meridians in the body. This flow of "Qi" is important to the well-being of the body and serves many functions. According to TCM theory, "Qi" helps in the circulation of blood in the body as well as in the formation of a defence system against external pathogens. The needling of the acupoints helps to ensure the smooth passage of "Qi", and is thereby said to strengthen all the functions of this life force.

Acupuncture is arguably the most well-researched aspect of TCM, particularly for its analgesic properties. Research has shown that acupuncture is efficacious in reducing cravings

and withdrawal symptoms, as well as improving engagement in long-term treatment programmes. When used as an adjunct treatment for the management of addictions, acupuncture helps to improve both physical and mental health aspects, thereby facilitating recovery from addictions. The most talked-about mechanism is the regulation of endogenous opioids such as endorphins, but the involvement of the Gamma Amino Butyric Acid system has been discussed as well. Acupuncture has also been shown to stimulate the immune system and other physiological processes that help in recovery.

Acupuncture in treatment plans

The use of acupuncture for the management of addictions began earnestly in the 1970s, when a Hong Kong neurosurgeon by the name of Dr HL Wen fortuitously used acupuncture to anaesthetise his patient prior to a brain surgery for treatment of his opium addiction. Because he noted the abatement of withdrawal symptoms with acupuncture, the operation was eventually cancelled.

Since then, there has been a proliferation of centres in America and Europe which have incorporated acupuncture into their treatment programmes for drug and alcohol addiction. In fact, the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association, based in the US, has come up with a standardised auricular acupuncture protocol for the treatment of addictions.

Since 2013, the National Addictions Management Service (NAMS) located within the Institute of Mental Health has run an outpatient Acupuncture



Clinic as part of its multi-disciplinary approach to the treatment of addictions. Acupuncture is used as an adjunct treatment to complement and enhance existing treatment programmes. These include medical treatment, individual counselling, family therapy, psychoeducation and support groups for patients and their families, as well as inpatient detoxification and rehabilitation. Using a combination of theories on addiction disorders derived from both Western medicine and TCM acupuncture, an integrative acupuncture treatment plan is then drawn up for the patient.

The acupuncture service at NAMS is offered only to patients with a primary diagnosis of an addiction disorder. Patients who are pregnant, on blood thinning medications, or those who have a history of seizures should not undergo acupuncture. A consultation session takes place before the acupuncture session, during which a psychiatrist cum certified addictions acupuncturist will assess the individual's suitability for acupuncture.

The acupoints used in acupuncture for addictions treatment are largely found on the scalp, the ears and the four limbs, and a minimum of ten half-hour sessions over six weeks is recommended. Only pre-packaged sterile disposable needles are used for each session. At the end of the ten sessions, the patient's progress will be assessed and the patient will be advised as to whether further acupuncture sessions would be beneficial.

Importantly, however, acupuncture should not be used as a standalone treatment for addictions. Patients should first seek consultation from a doctor for a proper diagnosis of an addiction before they seek out complementary acupuncture treatment. Addiction is a multi-faceted illness involving psychological, social and biological factors, and each of these aspects should be addressed as part of the patient's holistic recovery. A multi-disciplinary team of diverse professionals, such as

doctors, counsellors, pharmacists and medical social workers, can help to ensure that the patient's addiction is managed comprehensively. This, together with adjunct treatments, such as acupuncture, can help to boost an individual's recovery from an addiction. ♦

Legend

1. Close-up view of an auricular acupuncture
2. Performing auricular acupuncture

Dr Low is a psychiatrist with the National Addictions Management Service at the Institute of Mental Health. He completed his MSc in Addiction Studies at King's College London. Dr Low holds a Graduate Diploma in Acupuncture and is a registered acupuncturist with the Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioners Board.



SMA EVENTS MAY–JUL 2019

DATE	EVENT	VENUE	CME POINTS	WHO SHOULD ATTEND?	CONTACT
CME Activities					
4 May, 29 Jun and 6 Jul Sat	Medical Expert Witness Training 2019	Academia, Furama City Centre Hotel, Family Justice Courts	6	Doctors	Mr Roland Lim 6593 7884 mewt@ams.edu.sg
7 May Tue	Mastering Adverse Outcomes	Sheraton Towers Hotel	2	Family Medicine and All Specialties	Terry/Siti Athirah 6223 1264 mpsworkshops@sma.org.sg
11 May Sat	Mastering Difficult Interactions with Patients	Novotel Singapore on Stevens	2	Family Medicine and All Specialties	Terry/Siti Athirah 6223 1264 mpsworkshops@sma.org.sg
16 May Thu	Building Resilience and Avoiding Burnout	Sheraton Towers Hotel	2	Family Medicine and All Specialties	Terry/Siti Athirah 6223 1264 mpsworkshops@sma.org.sg
25 May Sat	Privacy Awareness	Novotel Singapore Clarke Quay	2	Medical Practitioners, Aspiring and Current Practice Owners, Clinic Managers and Staff	Denise 6540 9195 denisetan@sma.org.sg
29 May Wed	Mastering Your Risk	Novotel Singapore on Stevens	2	Family Medicine and All Specialties	Terry/Siti Athirah 6223 1264 mpsworkshop@sma.org.sg