



A Need for Needles Acupuncture—Does it Really Work?

by

Sarah G. Stonefoot and Clyde Freeman Herreid

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Janet sat in her car in the driveway of her mother's house and eyed the front yard, which was completely taken over by a vegetable garden. It was possible that somewhere in there her mother was hidden, picking over her prized vegetables. Her mother was a bit eccentric. Actually, the word crazy sometimes came to Janet's mind when considering her mother. But she never said it out loud. This was her mother after all.

Janet took a deep breath and then grabbed the door handle. It was time for another lunch with her mother, a meal that would inevitably turn into an argument, as they always did.

Audrey greeted her daughter at the door even before Janet had a chance to knock.

"Why, hello, darling."

Janet was carefully unhooking a tomato vine from her foot before her mother noticed. She looked up and greeted her with a sense of apprehension.

"Hello, Mother."

"Oh, Janet, it's so nice to see you. Isn't it just a gorgeous day today?" Her mother was bubbling over with her usual happiness and high spirits.

"It's hot," Janet grumbled, "too hot."

"Well, come on in. I've just put together a delicious salad for lunch."

Salad again, Janet thought to herself. She was glad she had stopped at McDonalds on the way over. She forced a smile and followed her mother into the house.

Lunch went well, until Audrey decided she couldn't hold her idea back any longer. "I was reading that magazine you got me the other day."

"Oh, really," replied Janet, pleased. She had gotten her mother a subscription to Time magazine for Christmas. It was her attempt to get her mother on the same track as the rest of the world, or at least aware of what was happening. She knew her mother used them as coasters on the coffee table more than anything else.

"Yes, and I came across this really interesting article. It was on acupuncture."

Janet sighed. Her hopes evaporated. Of course, the only thing to interest her mother was an article on some sort of nonsense.

"As I was reading it, it began to make a lot of sense. It mentioned that arthritis was one of the things that it helped. And seeing how you're always telling me that arthritis is why my wrists bother me, I thought it might be helpful. My wrists have been acting up a little. I couldn't garden the other day. My poor tomato plants are going to wither away in the sun if I don't get to them soon."

“Mom, you don’t want acupuncture. The whole thing is ridiculous. It’s a big scam. There is no way that putting needles in your body is going to stop your pain. What you need is to see a doctor.” Janet’s frustration level was quickly rising.

“I had a feeling you would say that,” Audrey sighed. “So I think you should read the article.” She handed her daughter the magazine.

“No, Mom,” Janet said pushing it away.

Janet knew she had the final say in this situation. After all, she worked for her mother’s insurance agency and had pulled some strings to get her mother covered. She felt strongly that she had a say in what treatment her mother had. Audrey had reluctantly accepted the insurance, knowing that Janet would have some control over her life. She solved the problem simply. She avoided going to doctors.

“Mom, I really think you should go to a doctor about your arthritis. If you don’t, it will just get worse. This could become serious. I’m sure there are tons of different medicines you could choose from to help the pain,” Janet preached. It was a speech she had given many times before, yet as before it got nowhere with her mother.

“Janet—don’t start that again. You know that I’m not putting any drugs into my body, especially when there’s no good reason.”

“No good reason? Mom you’re in pain,” Janet responded with a touch of sympathy entering her voice.

Audrey sighed. She looked down and realized she had been massaging her wrist the whole time. She knew she was being difficult. Her daughter was right, at least about the pain.

“Ok—what if we compromise,” Audrey began. “What if we talk to a doctor about acupuncture. Will you be convinced to let me try the treatment if you hear from a doctor that it is beneficial?”

“Fine,” Janet replied. She knew no sensible doctor would agree to sticking needles in her mother to get rid of her pain. The whole thing was ludicrous.



It was two weeks later and Janet and her mother were on their way to see a doctor. Audrey had already jumped out of the car and had headed into the doctor’s office. Janet dragged herself out and followed.

They sat in the waiting room for what seemed like hours. Janet, in her business suit, was hiding behind the New York Times trying not to imagine what people were thinking of her mother. At least her mother had taken off her apron, but she was still in gardening clothes, straw hat resting in her lap. The nurse had seemed amused when she collected the initial data. She now reappeared.

“Audrey Baker, you can come in now.”

Janet was glad to escape the eyes of everyone in the waiting room and followed her mother into the doctor’s office. Moments later, Dr. Ramirez walked in as they were getting settled.

“Hello, how are you two doing today?” Dr. Ramirez asked.

“Great, thank...” Janet began.

“Just wonderful,” Audrey interrupted. “The reason why we’re here today is that my daughter can’t seem to grasp the concept of acupuncture. I have some pain in my wrists, and I understand it can help that. So, I was wondering if you could just take a couple minutes to explain it to her.”

Janet scowled, but before she could say anything, the doctor answered.

“What kind of pain do you have?”

“Oh, nothing serious,” Audrey said. “I’m just getting old and my bones aren’t what they used to be. When I’m pulling weeds they tend to get a little sore.”

“Oh, you’re a gardener,” Dr. Ramirez said, pleased. “You know, I have a garden of my own.”

“Really!” said Audrey. “Flowers or vegetables?”

“Both, actually.”

“OK,” Janet interrupted. “I’m sorry to be rude, but I am on a tight schedule. Can you just tell my mother that acupuncture will not work on her pain, so that we can set up a suitable treatment.”

“I see,” Dr. Ramirez said.

He could see how this was going. He looked at Audrey’s chart and paused as he thought how to most effectively approach this case.



Your task is to assist Dr. Ramirez in reaching his goal. There is a recent trend in medicine termed “evidence-based medicine,” in which physicians search the literature to determine effective approaches to treatment, rather than just doing what one of their teachers taught them to do in medical school. Your task is to approach the case in this manner, to scientifically investigate the pros and cons of acupuncture treatment, consult with Dr. Ramirez on what you find, and offer suggestions on how to best proceed with Audrey and Janet.

You will be divided into groups of four; two will search for the “pro” literature (that which supports acupuncture) and two for the “con” literature. Be sure you understand the theory behind acupuncture, the different treatments that acupuncturists might use, and the evidence or lack of it that suggests that acupuncture may work, including the argument that any positive results are due to the placebo effect.

When you return to class armed with evidence, your job will be to work out a consensus consultative opinion to Dr. Ramirez in your group of four students, and to share that opinion with the rest of the class. Part of that sharing will involve the soundness of the evidence. Then, you will need to work out among yourselves what you think Dr. Ramirez should do.

A good place to start your research would be the Acupuncture Information and Resources,” National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicines. National Institutes of Health website at <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/acupuncture/>.

Copyright © 2004 by the National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science.

Originally published 06/28/04 at <http://www.sciencecases.org/acupuncture/acupuncture.asp>

Please see our **usage guidelines**, which outline our policy concerning permissible reproduction of this work.