

## My Acupuncture Experience

[Ed. Note - The following is a first person account of my own experience with acupuncture and should be considered editorial in nature]

When I started researching TCM and acupuncture - in response to reader requests - I was somewhat skeptical. But as I learned more about it, and realized that many doctors had integrated acupuncture into their practice and took a reasonably scientific approach to it, I became intrigued. In looking at primary research reports, there appeared to be some evidence that acupuncture can help with chronic neck and shoulder pain. This was especially relevant to my current health status.

I had what is considered a successful decompression surgery for CM/SM about 5 years ago. While I am orders of magnitude better off than I was before the surgery, I am bothered - and limited - by near constant pain in the right side of my neck and shoulder. Years of physical therapy helped with my strength, but did nothing for the pain. Three shoulder surgeries provided temporary relief each time, but after a few months I'd be back where I started.

Given what I had learned about acupuncture, I decided to give it a try. I found a local acupuncturist - who is also a Doctor from China - on the NCCAOM web site ([www.nccaom.org](http://www.nccaom.org)) and called for an appointment. The doctor called me back to get some background. Although there was a bit of a language barrier, I was able to determine he wasn't familiar with Chiari and syringomyelia, but he asked to see my MRI's, so I went ahead and set up an appointment. Before my visit, I printed out the Overview presentation on this website and gathered my MRI's and medical records.

In the hours leading up to my appointment, I became very nervous. What if it made things worse? What if it actually sparked a recurrence? My mind flipped back and forth between the lure of easing my pain versus the risk of doing anything - especially something as esoteric as acupuncture. In the end, the promise of reducing - or even eliminating - the pain won out and I headed out for my appointment.

When I arrived at his office, it looked much like a regular doctor's office and there were the standard forms to fill out - although I did notice that the doctor evaluation sheet had a section for a tongue evaluation. The doctor introduced himself and took me into a regular looking exam room. He started taking a history and we quickly dove into what Chiari and SM are all about. He was very happy that I had brought the presentation and was eager to learn about the conditions. He then focused on my residual neck and shoulder problems and performed a typical physical exam - strength, range of motion, etc. - that I had had countless times before.

He concluded that my trapezius muscle (the large triangle shaped muscle on the back that connects to the head and shoulder) was incredibly tight and thought that was causing most of my problems. To my surprise, and disappointment, however, he also cautioned me that acupuncture can only do so much. He said that if there were serious nerve damage, the acupuncture probably would not help. He also said that the beneficial effects of the treatments may not last very long, and finally that it may take 5-6 treatments to see any results. He went on to say that his style of acupuncture was different than the ancient technique; he uses electroacupuncture to relax muscles and also heats the area with a light tuned to a specific frequency. So far, the visit was almost identical to seeing a Western style doctor or physical therapist as his exam entailed nothing out of the ordinary.

The doctor then showed me the needles he would be inserting and I took off my shirt and laid face down on the treatment table (the table was like a massage table with a place to put your face and rest your hands). The doctor began inserting needles in my shoulder and neck area. Although there was almost no pain, there was a strange sensation when he twirled the needles. I thought he had hooked up the electricity already, because it felt like there was a charge going through different parts of my body, but when I looked up, I realized the feeling was from just the needles. Only one needle actually hurt - in my neck, right at a nerve root - and he warned me in advance it might hurt, but he removed the needle right away and things seemed ok. Once the needles were inserted, he hooked up the electric device starting with the needles on my trapezius muscle. The current made the muscle twitch, but it wasn't unpleasant. Next he brought over a heat lamp type device and started warming up the muscles on my back and neck. The whole session lasted about an hour and right after I got up, my neck and shoulder were much looser. I paid \$60 for the visit - no, not covered by insurance - and set up an appointment for a week later.

I was feeling pretty good when I left his office, but by the time I got home my neck had stiffened considerably and was actually swollen on the right side. Needless to say, I thought my worst fears had been realized and I began berating myself for taking such a risk. That night was tough sleeping because of my stiff neck, but by morning it was a little better. To my delight, I found that even though my neck was tight, my shoulder felt great. I could move my arm in a way I hadn't been able to for years. I called the doctor to tell him about my swollen neck, and he said that it should go away and that because of the SM I was probably more sensitive to stimulation near the nerve root. He went on to say that if I went back, he would work away from the neck more. At that point I wasn't sure what to do, because my neck felt lousy but my shoulder felt great.

Over the next couple of days however, the swelling in my neck subsided and things really loosened up. I was able to do things I hadn't done in a long time with very little pain. There was still some discomfort, and I could tell my shoulder muscles were weak, but the pain and mobility had definitely improved. The effect did start to taper off the next week as I banged away on the computer all day long, but it still wasn't as bad as it was before. I decided to go to my second appointment the following weekend.

The second appointment was shorter than the first. The doctor reviewed with me what had happened following my first treatment and suggested that he apply the electric stimulation further away from my neck. My wife had reminded me to verify that he uses disposable needles, so he showed me the packages they come in and assured me that's all he uses. As he was inserting the needles, I mentioned to

him that the last treatment had really made my right hand feel better, so he focused some attention on that as well. When he hooked up the electrical stimulation, he found a level I was comfortable with - he did mention I was very sensitive to stimulation compared to most people - and the treatment lasted about 20 minutes.

Things felt pretty good this time after the treatment. Follow-on visits are only \$40, and I paid him and set up my next appointment. He thinks 4-5 treatments should really improve things, so far so good. I don't know if the acupuncture will help long term, but I'm hopeful. I also don't know if it would have provided as much relief if I didn't have the shoulder surgeries and exercised so diligently year after year. I can't say if acupuncture is right for everyone, but I can say I'm glad I tried it.

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