

You're a *what*?

Acupuncturist

by Kathleen Green

Got a headache? It could be your liver. And as part of your treatment, Jon Simon might stick a needle in your toe.

Jon is an acupuncturist. He uses needles, herbs, and other devices to treat ailments such as headaches, back problems, and foot pain. Through his work, Jon advocates Oriental medicine's centuries-old precept that the body is interconnected—head to toe and everything in between. It's a complex approach to well-being, he says, not a quick fix: "Acupuncture is more than just sticking needles in somebody's body. It's a whole system of healing."

Patients begin visits to Jon's New York City office by completing a form to describe their condition. Jon reviews the form and then, in an interview with the patient, focuses on specific symptoms. "It may seem like I'm asking a bunch of unrelated questions," he says, "but I'm trying to find the nature of the complaint." Based on information gathered from the form and the interview, Jon recommends treatment.

The most common acupuncture treatment is needling: strategically inserting and manipulating thin, solid needles at specific points along the skin. Other treatment methods, often used in conjunction with needling, include prescriptions of herbs or herb mixtures; acupressure, which involves massaging instead of needling acupuncture points; and recommendations for lifestyle changes, such as dietary modifications and exercise.

Jon usually gives a brief description of Oriental medicine so that patients understand his suggested treatment. Oriental medicine is based on the principle that human energy circulates



along interconnected pathways known as meridians. Pain or illness results when the flow of energy is disrupted; by stimulating meridians via specific points on the skin, acupuncture eliminates disruption and restores balance.

Modern medicine's explanation is that acupuncture stimulates the nervous system, releasing chemicals in the muscles, spinal cord, and brain. These chemicals, which include endorphins, help the body to influence its internal system for regulating pain.

Jon then devises a "point prescription" for the patient. Applying light to heavy pressure, he uses his trained hands to feel around acupuncture points on the patient's body to determine where to place a needle. "When I first started, I was more precise about following the points as memorized," he says. "Now I'm more imprecise because I'm going by feel." Once he finds what he's looking for, he

holds the acupuncture point with one hand and, with the other hand, uses a guide tube to insert the needle.

Most treatments, Jon says, require between 4 and 20 needles that vary in size from as thin as a strand of hair to about the width of a small sewing needle. Sensitivity to the needle's prick varies from one person to another and depends on factors such as needle type and treatment style; temporary sensations after insertion may include warmth, itching, or numbness.

The needles—and the patient—stay in place for an average of 20 minutes. In Jon's practice, an entire treatment session lasts about 1 to 2 hours for a first visit, which includes the interview, and 45 minutes to an hour for subsequent ones.

According to Jon, some patients feel better immediately; others don't notice a change until hours later, and a small number have no response. Most patients need two or three treatments, he says, before they see a difference—regardless of their body's response to the first visit. "Over the course of several treatments, I expect a patient to get better," says Jon. "It's genuinely surprising to me if someone says there's been no improvement."

Point taken. Data show that acupuncture and other forms of traditional Oriental medicine are gaining popularity as a treatment choice. A study in the November 1998 *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that between 1990 and 1997, patient visits to practitioners of alternative medicine increased about 47 percent. And in a survey published in the January 2001 *American Demographics*, 70 percent of respondents had tried at least 1 of 8 selected forms of alternative medicine, including acupuncture.

Not surprisingly, the number of acupuncturists also has risen. According to the Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine

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Alliance, the number of licensed acupuncturists nearly tripled in less than a decade: from 5,525 in 1992 to 14,228 in 2000.

Jon joined those ranks in 2000. He had completed a bachelor of arts degree in history at Bates College, then joined the Peace Corps and taught for 2 years in Nepal. During a stop in Japan on his return to New York, Jon decided “on a lark” to visit an acupuncturist about a nagging ankle injury. The treatment more than helped, he says: the acupuncturist did a thorough workup still unmatched by any Jon has seen performed in this country.

As effective as the treatment was, however, Jon forgot about it for several years. Back from the Peace Corps and his travels, he received a master of fine arts degree in writing from Columbia University and freelanced as a writer, swimming instructor, and dog walker. It was while walking a dog a few weeks after the birth of his first son, as Jon pondered the financial responsibilities of fatherhood, that he recognized the need for a stable income. The successful acupuncture treatment leaped to the forefront of his mind, and he decided to look into acupuncture as a career.

Jon checked the phone book, investigated program credentials, and applied to two accredited acupuncture training schools in New York City. Through the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, Jon took classes and gained clinical experience. He earned a master of science degree in traditional Oriental medicine, took and passed the rigorous examinations required for licensing, and completed requirements for certification in acupuncture and Chinese herbology.

The Pacific College of Oriental Medicine is 1 of 38 programs fully accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, an agency recognized by the

U.S. Department of Education. The accredited programs confer primarily master’s-level certificates, diplomas, or degrees. Some schools offer programs that grant a combined bachelor’s and master’s degree.

Programs vary in length and specialty, but most take 3 or 4 years, including summers, of study and clinical experience. Coursework includes both commonly taught subjects—such as anatomy, biophysics, and nutrition—and those exclusive to instruction in traditional Oriental medicine—such as acupuncture, herbology, and needle technique. Clinical experience comprises observation, assistantships, and internships. Each State has its own licensing standards.

As a basis for their licensure rules, 40 States and the District of Columbia use an exam administered by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. Applicants for Commission certification must be at least 18 years old and have fulfilled formal training and experience requirements, agreed to a code of ethics, passed the Commission’s comprehensive written and point-location exams, and completed a course in clean-needle technique. The latter requirement emphasizes preventing transmission of blood-borne diseases, such as hepatitis.

Like most acupuncturists, Jon is self-employed. Self-employed acupuncturists must pay their own business costs—which include those for malpractice insurance, equipment purchase, office rental, and advertising—out of their earnings. The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect earnings data on acupuncturists. The American Association of Oriental Medicine says acupuncturists usually charge between \$40 to \$70 per session; some charge more or less, depending on the cost of treatment in

their location.

But financial reward is not Jon’s chief motivation for his work. Helping people heal is what’s most meaningful to him—whether he’s volunteering his services, as he did for rescue crews working in the World Trade Center wreckage last fall, or treating patients who visit his office routinely. “I see people—including those who have chronic illnesses and feel they have no hope—get better, and I get to be a part of that,” he says. “You gain an awareness of what it means to be truly sick and the courage it takes to get better.

“It’s inspiring.”



Background photos courtesy of the American Association of Oriental Medicine. Photo of Jon Simon by Andrew Simon.