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## Acupuncture offered as treatment for Gulf War vets

Therapy is tested for its pain relief

May 30, 2011 | By Chelsea Conaboy, Globe Staff

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John Overcash of Ayer was already a believer. Acupuncture had relieved the pain from a longstanding wrist injury. When the opportunity came up to enter an acupuncture study for people who served in the Gulf War, the 21-year Army veteran jumped at it.

Overcash, 55, had never thought of the pain in his knees and ankles as the product of Gulf War illness, defined by a broad set of symptoms, including fatigue, joint and muscle pain, headaches, and indigestion, affecting people who have served in the Gulf. The illness is difficult to pinpoint and harder to treat. In more than a decade of study, researchers have not been able to find a cause.

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Lisa Conboy, a health researcher at the New England School of Acupuncture, knew that acupuncture was effective in relieving many of those symptoms. In 2009, she applied for and won a \$1.2 million grant to study its effects on service members from the first Gulf War.

But persuading the Department of Defense that an alternative treatment such as acupuncture could work was the easy part. Getting veterans to enroll is a different story.

Though scientists continue to debate how acupuncture works and whether it is effective beyond a placebo effect, military leaders have been embracing more of what they call “complementary” therapies. The Army surgeon general two years ago created a task force to look at how to improve pain management for military members. The resulting report dedicated an entire section to therapies such as yoga, acupuncture, and massage.

The VA Boston Healthcare System began offering acupuncture for pain management several years ago.

“We have a very challenging patient population who sometimes have severe disabilities related to pain, and we wanted to increase the number of modalities available to them,” said Dr. Michael Charness, the system chief of staff.

“There’s a good evidence base for the use of acupuncture in the treatment of pain. We don’t consider it an alternative therapy in that sense.”

Conboy is pleased by the change. “Just that the military is even interested in looking at this at all — that was not the case 10 years ago,” she said.

But getting veterans to try acupuncture has been a challenge, Conboy said. The Army task force noted in its report that one significant obstacle to helping soldiers with their pain is the “no pain, no gain” mentality. The attitude often causes people to delay treatment, and small problems become big ones, the report said.

“These guys are trained not to have any problems,” Conboy said.

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