

## **Acupuncture in the Global Village: Report From the 15th International AIDS Conference**

### **Acupuncture in the Global Village:**

By Kristen Porter, MAc, LAc and Beth Sommers, MPH, LAc

The theme of the 15th International AIDS Conference, "Access for All," resonated in a variety of ways with over 15,000 delegates. Held in July in Bangkok, Thailand, this year's gathering actively promoted access to medications and treatment, access to education and information, and access to resources for scientists, clinicians, community leaders and advocates.

Sponsors of the conference, which is held every other year, included the International AIDS Society and the Thailand Ministry of Public Health, in cooperation with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; the United Nations AIDS Bureau; and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Conference tracks included presentations on basic science; clinical research, treatment, and care; epidemiology and prevention; social and economic issues; and program and policy administration. Over 10,000 abstracts were submitted for consideration and were peer-reviewed by experts throughout the world. Special guests and speakers at the conference included U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, and activist/actor Richard Gere.

Although previous conferences focused on scientific research and medical findings, emphasis has shifted to creating exchange and discussion on issues related to social, public health, and community-related responses to the pandemic. A greater commitment to bridging gaps in collaboration and cooperation is evolving, as was evidenced in the broader range and increased visibility of complementary and integrative health care speakers and presentations. The importance of creating strategic alliances is becoming more appreciated as the worldwide epidemic continues to advance.

Seeing saffron-robed Buddhist monks and nuns, traditional healers from Africa clad in multi-hued garments of Kente cloth, and dedicated activists from around the world provided powerful images about the interconnectedness and energetic exchange that all of us share. The perspectives and wide varieties of viewpoints represented a spectrum of experience and backgrounds, a situation that those of us involved in Asian medicine can appreciate as we comprehend the ever- changing dynamic between yin and yang.

Exhibition booths included an area where conference-goers could drink tea and speak with monks (called "Monk Chat"), quiet areas for receiving Thai massage, and healing services for body and soul provided by African healers.

This year's programming included numerous presentations on the roles of traditional healing and other alternative and complementary health practices in working with people living with HIV/AIDS. One of the most exciting and innovative symposia of the conference brought together traditional healers, physicians and researchers, all of whom were from Asia or Africa. An audience of a few hundred people was treated to a spirited panel discussion, the first of its kind ever featured in the conference venue.

The symposium was based on a conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in 2003, entitled "A Journey of Connectedness: Workshop on Traditional Medicine and HIV/AIDS." Yahaya Sekagya, chair of the symposium, is from Uganda and is affiliated with PROMETRA, an international organization dedicated to the preservation and restoration of traditional medicine. Facilitator of the symposium, Mary Ann Burris, represented the Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health, based in Kenya.

A powerful message of the symposium echoed the sentiment of the previous gathering in Kenya:

"We all walk to the future in the footsteps of our ancestors. We believe our ancient ways have many things to offer us today as we work together to make the world a healthier place for all who live here. All of us live in communities affected by HIV and AIDS. All of us live in a world affected by HIV and AIDS.

"We invite the scientific community to work with us, to respectfully research our healing approaches so that they can be understood and shared more widely. We commit ourselves to assuring that this wisdom is passed on and does not die or become neglected. We welcome others to help us in this work. We call upon the international HIV/AIDS community to realize that appropriate treatment and care for HIV and AIDS should include traditional healing therapies. We commit ourselves to supporting one

another and working together."<sup>1</sup>

The sentiment of cooperation was illustrated eloquently in this statement by Erick Gbodossou:

"Five centuries ago, the native Americans lost their land, and their people had to hide their knowledge underground. Five centuries ago, Africa was devastated because of slavery, and their knowledge was destroyed. Five centuries ago, all indigenous civilization around the world was destroyed...their cultures, religions, (and) spirituality.

Today it is time for a renaissance, time for indigenous science to play its role, time for ancient civilization to be reborn and to be promoted. The time is now to give hope to a future generation. Today, healers work with physicians, with anthropologists, with pharmacists, advocates, journalists ... All speak about making a bridge between the two sciences. The time is now. It is our responsibility to build this bridge."<sup>2</sup>

Numerous poster presentations on acupuncture and Chinese herbs were integrated into the conference proceedings. These included a report about a clinical trial on managing neuropathic pain related to HIV/AIDS; results of the study suggested that acupuncture could result in pain reduction as well as improvements in related symptoms.<sup>3</sup> Another presentation focused on using Chinese traditional medicine in caring for people co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C<sup>4</sup> and demonstrated the feasibility and acceptability of this type of programming. A project that assessed health outcomes noted that individuals who use acupuncture may experience fewer AIDS-related symptoms and improvement in energy.<sup>5</sup>

Presentations also addressed ways in which acupuncture can be integrated into public health programming,<sup>6</sup> and training health care providers to use acupuncture in Uganda.<sup>7</sup> Information on accessing the content of these and other abstracts can be obtained via the conference Web site, [www.aids2004.com](http://www.aids2004.com).

Although the AIDS epidemic is nowhere near being resolved, the conference provided hope and support for healing. The role of acupuncture and other forms of traditional medicine is becoming more widely appreciated and is being taken more seriously. Our experience with Chinese and Asian medicine, grounded in energetic exchange with the life force, provides us with the possibility of contributing to the process of transforming this global crisis into an opportunity for planetary healing.

## References

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*Authors' note* : Acupuncturists who are licensed in the Washington, D.C. area and are interested in public health activities are invited to participate in the upcoming annual meeting of the American Public Health Association from November 6-10. Over 15,000 delegates are expected from all over the country. For more information on the meeting, please go to [www.apha.org/schedules](http://www.apha.org/schedules). Organizers from the Alternative and Complementary Health Practices Section are looking for volunteer acupuncturists to staff two-hour shifts and provide sample mini-sessions and demonstrations November 8 and 9. Please contact Beth Sommers at [bsommers@pathwaysboston.org](mailto:bsommers@pathwaysboston.org).

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