

Acupuncture vs. Cancer: Re-Engaging the Body's Immune System

By Tracy Litsey

Many of us have cancer cells or pre-cancerous cells in our bodies right now, even though we may never get the disease called cancer. Why? Because our body's immune system routinely quells renegade cells and would-be malignancies before they ever take hold.

So why do some people's defenses break down? Why, once someone has had cancer, are they more prone to get it again than others? Can acupuncture re-engage the body's natural defense system effectively enough to help prevent or even "cure" cancer?

Some people answer that last question with a simple "Yes!" Some scientists theorize that cancer thrives when the immune system's defensive action can't or won't react effectively. This lack of immune response may be due to age; toxic or viral damage; genetics; unique traits within the cancer cell that stymie immune response; or other factors. The high incidence of metastases and cancer recurrence, even after surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, attests that although perhaps successful at wiping out the initial cancer, these treatments fail to restore the immune system response to that of a non-cancer-prone individual.

Furthermore, in addition to a cancer-desensitized immune system, the cancer patient's body may have other internal signals that are inclined toward cancer recurrence. For example, as a tumor grows, the body may acclimate to the presence of abnormal cell growth, entraining the brain to accept the cancer as a natural, normal presence in the system. After the tumor is removed, the body may still respond as if it should be there, much like an amputee's "phantom limb" syndrome. The brain may even send messages that support regrowth.

Can acupuncture retrain the immune system and brain toward a natural and successful antagonistic approach to dangerous cell growth? Some Oriental medical doctors are now using acupuncture in new ways to help the body's immune system relearn its original "seek and destroy" mission against cancer.

One such doctor, Dr. Wang Fuda, of Greenville Research Clinic in southern Taiwan, currently sees 100-200 patients per day. Over 70 percent of his clinic patrons are cancer patients. Dr. Fuda believes that acupuncture, employed correctly, can retrain the body's immune system to defeat cancer, and correct or erase faulty body signals hospitable to cancer.

Dr. Fuda sees the needle as a homeopathic instrument. The point of the needle is actually perceived by the body as an enemy. As the needle pricks, the body musters its defenses against the invader. Fuda says the trained hand can actually feel the *qi* energy and body tissue resist penetration of the acupuncture needle. Applied at key points, he believes the immune system can be retrained and reactivated in some people, and this defensive action can be channeled to the site of the cancer.

Dr. Fuda couples his acupuncture with the innovative use of a unique form of electronic stimulation. He also has identified 20 key acupoints that carry the stimulation "signal" most effectively to the immune system and the affected organs. Dr. Fuda's technique relies on several acupuncture layouts he has tested by trial and error in his rural clinic. He adjusts these layouts based on the patient's status, symptoms and recovery response.

All of Dr. Fuda's cancer patients have hospital diagnoses, and make their own choices as to whether they will have surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. In Taiwan, as in the United States, the cancer patients participate with their hospitals in regularly timed follow-up examinations after diagnosis and treatment. This has allowed Fuda to begin to track his progress using the patient's hospital charts.

Although his treatment is rarely acknowledged by the local oncologists as reason for the patient's recovery, dozens of patients line up at Dr. Fuda's clinic ready to tell their story of how his acupuncture resulted in their cancer remission. Several patients had exhausted all other medical means and were left with terminal sentences. Some patients, previously given only months to live, still return to Dr. Fuda two to three years later for weekly acupuncture treatment. Fuda's patients have even formed cancer survivor groups, and host karaoke parties to celebrate their hope and gratitude.

Dr. Fuda treats patients who have eschewed surgery, chemotherapy and radiation, as well as patients who have had all three. His best success, he claims, is in re-engaging the immune system of post-surgical patients.

"Normally, the cancer cell 'signal' is stronger than the healthy human cell," he explained. "A strange phenomena occurs just after surgery. Once the bulk of cancer cells are removed, the 'signal' of remaining cancer cells weakens." The time immediately after surgery is an important window of opportunity, according to Dr. Fuda, to intervene with acupuncture and "jump-start" the immune system into antagonism toward any remaining cancerous cells.

At Fuda's clinic, patients receive daily intensive acupuncture treatment prior to surgery. In the two weeks after surgery, the patients also receive intensive daily treatment to take advantage of the weakened cancer cell signal and the immune system's receptivity.

While some patients elect to move on to chemotherapy and radiation therapy, Fuda says these patients are often much harder to treat successfully with acupuncture. The delicate communication between needle and immune system is overridden by the body's battle with the devastation of chemotherapy and radiation. Fuda must first help the patient's body cope with the chemo and radiation, then begin the uphill battle to reactivate the immune system response.

Dr. Fuda's treatment regimen depends on the patient's willingness to receive ongoing treatment up to several times per week, tapering off to once or twice per week. Yet Fuda works in Taiwan, a culture that more readily accepts acupuncture as a primary health care choice. Whether Westerners would have the patience and confidence to rigorously commit to months of similar treatment may require a change of perspective on Oriental medicine. We have yet to view treatments like acupuncture as a front-line treatment for serious conditions like cancer, and tend to view it mainly as an adjunctive or "alternative" therapy.

Yet even as an adjunctive therapy, acupuncture also can help cancer patients endure and recover from the ravages of cancer treatment. Vivien Griffiths, PhD, an acupuncturist and coordinator of postgraduate studies and the master's of health science in acupuncture program at Australia's Southern Cross University, is also a breast cancer survivor. When she was diagnosed two years ago, Vivien said she initially didn't consider acupuncture a primary treatment due to the shock and expediency of her diagnosis. She had the opportunity to undergo surgery and chose to have the tumor removed. Although unsure, she chose chemotherapy, as well. Due to the side-effects of the chemotherapy, she then sought an acupuncturist who was prepared to

become involved in her recovery plan.

Following the mastectomy, her own personal acupuncturist used needles coupled with electrical stimulation at the leading edges of her surgical scar. Within 12 hours, the scar changed color from blue to a warm pink, and her pain related to movement greatly lessened. This improvement allowed her to undertake lymphatic drainage therapy and more vigorous physiotherapy.

Dr. Griffiths believes there is enormous potential for using acupuncture for post-cancer patients: first, to enhance the immune system of clients who are immunosuppressed (by chemotherapy and radiation) to assist their own bodies staying in remission; and second, for preventive care.

"As a cancer patient, you receive a cancer diagnosis and a whirlwind of activity begins: constant tests, surgery, chemotherapy, radiation," she said. "But once the cancer is arrested, it's a long struggle to regain the health one had prior to the diagnosis. It seems as if having a strong, healthy immune system is not perceived as 'that important' by conventional medicine. You're sent on your way and told to report back for a check-up once a year. You hold your breath hoping the cancer doesn't return. When you get a good result from your check-up, you think 'Thank God, I've got another year.' Your life depends on those words 'in remission' or 'clear.' Who or what is helping cancer survivors to stay in that category?"

Dr. Griffiths recently joined American acupuncturists for a training seminar at Dr. Fuda's Taiwan clinic. She hopes to bring his immune stimulation technique back to her university and demonstrate its possibilities via research. She's excited by the prospect of offering the technique in her private practice to fellow post-cancer patients as a pro-active step they can take to safeguard against recurrence, as well as those who wish to receive supportive therapy while simultaneously undergoing cancer therapy.

Griffiths is also a strong believer in Chinese herbal medicine. Following her breast cancer, she has continued to support her immune system with herbal medicine. However, she urges both Oriental medical doctors and patients to be vigilant about the type of cancer in relation to herbal prescriptions. For example, some women may have an estrogen-implicated breast cancer. Other women may have a sudden induced menopause as a result of chemotherapy. Certain herbal compounds containing plant estrogens also may complicate a treatment plan.

So, while medicine on the Western front continues its war on cancer with laboratories, lasers and genetic splicing, the acupuncture war on cancer is alive and well through new ways of thinking, new research and

new technology. The ongoing challenge for both Eastern and Western medicine is to respect, learn from, and combine each other's advances to the benefit of patients.



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