

## **Treating People With Acupuncture in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina**

By Susan Zimmer, DC, RN, FASA

I recently returned from volunteering with Acupuncturists Without Borders to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. It was a very rewarding, productive, proactive experience, which I strongly recommend that others pursue.

We were housed in FEMA tents, and provided with hot meals, showers and laundry services - provisions considerably superior to what most of the residents of New Orleans presently have.

I worked with a team of acupuncturists from across the U.S. and Canada. It was a great adventure and experience to participate in providing acupuncture to these very appreciative people, who benefited physically and emotionally in a matter of minutes. We witnessed acupuncture's ability to help them relax, release, and recharge to better carry on.

The following are observations and brief histories of what we saw and the people we treated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

### **Location: Wal-Mart Parking Lot, FEMA Financial Assistance Relief Center, Ninth Ward**

A 22-year old construction worker with a back injury had been treated with pain suppressants, went to a Red Cross center for an additional prescription, and was told to return to the first treating doctor, who was nowhere to be found due to the destruction caused by the hurricane. Still suffering with back pain, he reported that he actually did not like using drugs, as they left him feeling "doped up," but he did not know what else to do. He was eager to try acupuncture for some relief. He was treated with ear points for stress and back pain, and was grateful and surprised at his pain reduction and overall relaxation. He stated that he would prefer to have more acupuncture treatments for his back condition.

A 51-year-old woman drove in from seven hours away in northern Louisiana, where she had been able find a trailer to rent after losing her house. She was filing an application for financial help, and received a hot meal from a Red cross distribution truck. She had complaints of a temporal migraine of two days duration, for which she had ingested 10 Motrin (to no avail). She was anxious, irritable, frustrated, and tired, and reported a history of Crohn's disease. She was treated with acupuncture at GB 20-21, LI 4 & 10, LU 5, Liv 4, and KI 27, which relieved her headache after about 20 minutes. She was very happy to have her headache gone (after Motrin proved of no value), and could be heard bragging about acupuncture helping her so much.

Several Blackwater security guards and FEMA workers sat in our chairs, under our tent, in the parking lot, to experience the stress-relieving benefits of acupuncture. They expressed appreciation for our help, as detoxifying treatment on the ear points melted away layers of stress.

**Location: New Orleans Community Kitchen and Donated Clothing Center, Washington Park, Near French Quarter**

A 28-year old roofer had smashed his left hand and undergone three corrective surgeries, but was left with constant, throbbing pain and paresthesia. He was scheduled to undergo more surgery, or told to simply "live" with the condition. His friends, who had already been treated with acupuncture, strongly recommended he do the same. As he was being treated with hand and ear points, he happily told of the numbness and throbbing going away, much to his surprise and relief. He did not look forward to more surgery, and now, he knew he would not have to. He had experienced a noninvasive, effective option.

He had been receiving analgesic drug treatment via workers' compensation. I told him to have his treating doctor refer him to acupuncture for further care. Using the camera on his cell phone, we took pictures of his acupuncture treatment to document his care and its benefits. He then contacted his mother to come over to the park on her way home from work to get treated. She presented with fatigue, bilateral pain and leg edema after being on her feet all day at work. She was treated at points Sp 6/9, Liv 8, ST 36, and GB 34.

**Location: Common Ground Community Health Clinic, Algiers**

Numerous activists from around the country - and outside the country - worked from this center, helping with relief work. We treated a variety of people, helping them to relax, release, and recharge, to carry on with their lives throughout New Orleans.

One person was a sociology professor at LSU, who was now unemployed, lost her home, and moved to an apartment. She complained of shoulder pain, back pain, and headaches. She received acupuncture on the ear, GB 20-21, KI 6, BL 60, BL2, *yintang*, and *yuyao*. She felt much-needed relaxation, and a few tears flowed while she talked of the immense needs of the people of New Orleans. She thanked us for our help and offered a donation for us to continue with our work.

Another woman was helped with the multiple effects of stress. While having a chance to sit quietly in one of the chairs on the sidewalk where we treated her, she talked of finding a trailer to rent for \$1,500. Normally, it would have rented for only \$500, and FEMA was supposed to pay for it.

A 32-year old medical doctor who worked in the emergency department at New Orleans Hospital received help for his wrist. Since Katrina, he was riding his bike around town, as there was very little traffic, and few open gas stations. He had strained his wrist while using the bike. He was appreciative of the help he received with acupuncture, and I taught him how to traction his wrist and exercise it to avoid jamming the bones in his wrist.

The emergency room doctor was accompanied by another doctor, who was interested in learning about the use of acupuncture for anesthesia during surgery. I told him about some of my hospital experiences while studying in China. I also treated another medical doctor, this one from Belgium, who had come to the U.S. to see the destruction caused by Katrina first-hand, and to offer help.

A Red Cross nurse came out to our sidewalk for acupuncture to help her recuperate from the stress of long days. She thanked us for helping her, and so did many other people.

**Location: Mary Queen of Vietnam Catholic Church, Vietnamese Community, East New Orleans, After Sunday Mass**

Numerous church members of the 1,500 or so congregation were treated with acupuncture while eating a cooked on-location lunch of pork, chicken, vegetables, and egg rolls. I treated a 95-year-old with chronic sciatica, a 65-year-old with FBBS (failed back surgery syndrome) with a fairly recent four-inch lumbar scar, and a man with gout. They were very grateful of our group working on them. I talked with the pastor, and learned that he was presently studying to become an acupuncturist himself.

While treating this group of people, a man who was standing in the back fainted and fell to the ground. Acupuncturists nearby immediately went into action, checking his pulse and respiration, while a Red Cross nurse checked his blood pressure. Acupuncture points of different meridians were quickly stimulated, with pressure applied to HT 1/9, LI 4, Sp 6, and KI 17 to revive him. After that afternoon of treating many people of the Vietnamese community, one of the acupuncturists drove him back to his home to ensure his safety.

**Location: FEMA Jefferson Logistical Command Center, Water Treatment Facility, Tent City, Algiers**

This location also was our home in New Orleans, and was composed of rows and rows of tents, each fitted with generators and air-conditioning units. These same tents we lived in were actually first erected after Hurricane Katrina, then had to be re-erected after Hurricane Rita took them down. We were provided with hot meals, bagged lunches to take out to our daily acupuncture venues, hot showers, and laundry services. We were in very comfortable accommodations compared to most of New Orleans, complete with members of the National Guard to protect entry into the compound.

Most of the people here were treated during the evenings, after our daily acupuncture sessions around the city. We treated food service workers, who kept us going with a variety of ample helpings of food, including vegetarian selections. One food preparer had made it to New Orleans by bus to save \$40 on the cost of air travel. Like all of the others, they worked hard, long days and nights, and exhibited the symptoms of stress and hard work, such as pain, stiffness, headaches, anxiety, depression, insomnia, gastrointestinal discomfort, etc. Many were treated with the five ear points (*Shen Men*, Sympathetic, Kidney, Liver, Lung) while seated in a feng shui health circle. After a few minutes of needle insertion, they would all slowly melt into their chairs and nod off. How rewarding it was to observe them all benefiting from the gentle magic of acupuncture. Then, after their treatments, they would tell their coworkers to come in for care.

Besides word-of-mouth advertising, all we had was a sign made from a cardboard box, with the words "ACUPUNCTURE for STRESS REDUCTION, 5-8 pm, in TENT E7" taped over the back of a folding chair outside of our sleeping tents. There also was a posting on an outside bulleting board for people to see as they walked by.

Gradually, tent E7 became more and more popular with Forest Fire Service members, firefighters, forest rangers, National Guardsmen, FEMA personnel, construction crews, water treatment workers, shower and laundry managers, transporters, maintenance people, technicians, and others.

A 45-year-old Native American from Montana was treated with acupuncture for severe arm pain due to weeks of vibration from the chainsaws he used to remove trees from roads and buildings. GB 20-21 and LI 15 helped him raise his arms again.

A 35-year-old USDA forest ranger from California entered the healing tent after weeks of carrying heavy tools, guns and equipment on her belt. She also sported a bulletproof vest. She was exhausted and anxious, talked rapidly, complained of having no time to rest or eat well, was restless, and had a headache ... not to mention that the heavy equipment belt itself was killing her back.

I had her lie down on a cot. I wanted her to try to catch up on some much-needed rest while being treated. She kept saying how there was so much to do, but so little time in the day. I asked her if she wanted to remove her heavy belt to recline better on the cot. She refused, and was unable to relax if she knew her gun, which was on her belt, was not attached to her body at all times. I listened and let her talk. She told me that Imitrex didn't stop her migraines. At home, she was better able to control her migraines with a better diet than what was available here. She knew she was eating too many high-sugar carbohydrates. I treated her with the ear points and Liv 2, KI 6, BL 60, ST 36, SP 6, LI 4, and LI 10. Gradually, her rapid speech slowed down as she relaxed into the cot, and went into a well-deserved, deep sleep - with her heavy belt still firmly attached.

A 33-year-old National Guard member from California presented with a nagging, painful back that interfered with all of his daily activities. I had him lie prone on a cot, as I treated *hua tuo* and Bladder points along his tired spine. After treatment, he was amazed at the removal of all of his back pain. He exclaimed, "Back home, my best friend after my wife is my chiropractor. Now, I have another best friend in acupuncture." He then asked if acupuncture could help an old knee injury he also had. I told him to come back the next night, and one of us would gladly work on that for him. I told him to tell his commander how acupuncture helped him, so that more people could be reached. He said he definitely would, and was so excited with his positive results that he couldn't wait to get his partner in for treatment.

Also working in tent E7 was a physical therapist who drove down to New Orleans from Ohio to provide massage therapy. One night, I treated her with acupuncture on her tired, stiff, painful back while she rested prone on her massage table. I used BL 23, GV 2, and lumbar *hua tuo* points. She expressed amazement at how a few acupuncture needles placed in the ear or body could provide so much relief, with very little physical effort compared to the physically demanding work of massage therapy. Working with us, she

witnessed many people being helped with acupuncture, and felt their relaxed muscles after acupuncture treatments.

Of course, as acupuncturists, we practice what we preach. As time allowed, or as we made time, we took care of each other to also receive the benefits of acupuncture. We also were working hard every day, helping people to continue to carry on with the long work ahead.

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Acupuncture was brand new to most of the residents and rescue workers we treated, either as recipients and/or observers. We treated people from all over the country, along with some people from other countries, who were in the city to do relief work. It is my hope that they will remember our holistic work and help to spread the good news of acupuncture, and that they will want to continue receiving acupuncture in the future.

Working with Acupuncturists Without Borders was both rewarding and exciting. With just a few needles, in a matter of minutes, we were able to participate in helping a variety of people who presented with a variety of conditions. If anyone is interested in volunteering with AWB or helping out in other ways, please visit their Web site ([www.acuwithoutborders.org](http://www.acuwithoutborders.org)).



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