

Pinpointing the problem

Where baths and soothing cups of tea failed, could acupuncture help **Zoe Strimpel** sleep well at night?

I'M lying on my back in the Barbican with my shirt hiked up as a former Lloyds insurance broker inserts needles into the shallows of my belly's skin. I am wincing, yes, but mainly I've got my fingers crossed because I'm here on the chance that - unlike almost everything else - acupuncture will make me sleep better.

Once considered the domain of hippies and weirdos, Chinese Medicine has become mainstream. Acupuncture (of which there are several schools), herbal remedies and pressure point massage is offered up and down the high street and is sought by everyone from yummy mummies with back pain to City slickers with anger issues. But can it help a 26 year old woman who finds it hard to drop off at night?

Practitioners of Western and Chinese medicine do not generally see eye to eye. Dr Geoff Earnshaw, associate director of the Rood Lane Clinic at Bishopsgate, says: "If you're a Chinese doctor, you'll be working along the lines of energy flow and meridians. That's not to say it's wrong but we just haven't really embraced that in Western medicine." Western medicine has recognised, however, the effects of acupuncture on pain. "But we rationalise it by saying it affects nerve conduction. We know if we stimulate a nerve it can confuse the brain and switch off pain signal. It's about confusing and interfering with the nerve."

One of the most recent and (ever-more) prominent claims of acupuncturists is that they can help with sleep disorders. Needles are placed at key points (such as the ankle and wrist) that are said to correlate with an organ. The targeted organ, such as the kidneys, appears to be malfunctioning in a way that probably would not be picked up by Western medicine. For example, a sluggish kidney can disrupt the body's system and balance, especially as it won't be working smoothly with the other organs. In Chinese medicine, the kidney represents water (surprise surprise) while the heart represents fire. Too much water or fire in the body upsets the whole cart and make you either too sleepy or unable to sleep.

INTERCONNECTED PROBLEMS

This may sound airy fairy or just implausible, but Western medicine does tend to neglect the holistic side of things, often failing to look at the body as a whole with interconnected problems.

So, as an abominable sleeper myself, I decided to give it a go. I sought the help of Gary Minns of Barbican Acupuncture, a business Minns set up after quitting Lloyds and retraining in TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine). Our goal, over four sessions, was to improve my quality of sleep and perhaps other, possibly related functions such as digestion.

TOO MUCH HEAT

I've had sleep problems for years: it takes me ages to fall asleep and sometimes I don't manage at all. Often, especially when sharing a bed, the quality of my sleep is so

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atrocious that it feels that I've had a nap on an overnight flight, not a refreshing slumber. Sometimes it's that my mind won't turn off; sometimes it's just a pointless wakefulness.

I know all the recommended sleep-aids: have a hot drink before bed, don't do anything demanding or brain-twisting right before bed, don't eat too late, avoid stimulants, don't nap, save your bedroom for sleep, not work. None of these make the slightest difference to me; I've fallen asleep very soon after a workout or a rich dinner; equally I've failed entirely despite having taken a hot bath and had a cup of mint tea.

First, Minns took half an hour to talk about me and my body. "Your main complaint was insomnia," he says, "but I was also interested in more peripheral things such as night sweating, how thirsty you tend to feel and whether you are easily angered. All these details help to pinpoint the precise, underlying problem."

I told Minns I have phasal night sweats (for a time I'd awake drenched and have to place a towel over my sheet); I'm thirsty a lot and I have been known to be snappish and aggressive, particularly to people who phone me at a bad moment. Having listened to my "sluggish" pulse as well, Minns diagnosed "heart and kidney yin (water) deficiency." This is an imbalance by which there was too much heat and too little

water in my body: in other words I was overheating.

"In TCM, the heart relates to fire and the kidney relates to water," Minns says. "They are a pair of opposites that continually interact: the kidney water is turned into steam by the heart fire and is then able to reach and nourish all parts of the body; meanwhile, the kidney water gently douses the heart fire and keeps it under control. In your case, the water (or "yin") side of things was slightly lacking and so the fire was running a little bit out of control and interfering with your sleep (so-called "deficient heat")."

MIMIC NATURE

If this sounds a little far-fetched, Gerad Kite, director of another acupuncture clinic that works with the London Sleep Clinic on Harley Street, has a similar outlook: "Our bodies mimic nature," he says. He believes our organs relate to five elements: fire, water, wood, earth and metal. The kidney is water because it regulates the flow and quality of water in our system. The heart is fire as it pumps blood, which is what main-

tains our temperature just as the sun controls the Earth's temperature. "We've become very clever with our heads," he says, "but Western medicine was based on the humours: hot, cold, moist and dry. Same as drugs now, cooling and heating; anti-inflammatories are a coolant. Arthritis means too much fire and the drugs dispensed for it stimulate kidney function."

"If something is wrong in your system, sleep is the first thing to go."

I lay on my back and had needles inserted in my ankles, wrists, belly and forehead for 15 minutes. Each point related to an organ

Minns opted for a treatment of needles and herbal remedy, all designed to balance and calm my system. Once my body was happier, I'd start to sleep better.

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Acupuncture needles stimulate our vital energy, prompting our bodies to heal.

Picture:
JUPITER IMAGES



Gary Minns, a former Lloyds insurance broker, at his Barbican acupuncture practice.

Picture:
Micha Theiner/
CITY A.M.

organ or function: xinshu, for example, has a close connection with the heart and shenshu goes to the kidney. I'd turn over and in they'd go on my back and again my legs, wrists and ankles.

WILD JUJUBE

Minns says that when it comes to treating something as systemic as insomnia, herbs can play almost as big a role in treatment as needles. He made me a bespoke prescription based on a classic Chinese formula called Tianwang buxin dan. Each capsule had wild jujube, Chinese angelica, a form of asparagus, Chinese foxglove and something called poria. I was to have 12 capsules a day: that's a lot of herb power.

So did it work? Did my fire calm and my waters rise?

Certainly after each session I felt calmer and more refreshed. In the second week, my sleep did show signs of improvement: I began dropping off more quickly, though the quality of my sleep remained patchy, ranging from the adequately refreshing (when I slept

alone) to the exhaustingly shallow (sharing my bed).

I didn't notice a drastic improvement in my digestion as one might have expected from the herbs. Perhaps the modern Western body just isn't receptive to the jujube.

In conclusion, the small improvements that correlated with the period of treatment may indeed mean that had I kept it up I'd eventually be sleeping like a baby. But it's impossible to say because the changes were so slight and difficult to measure.

At the risk of sounding like a cynical (and overtired) kill-joy, I'd have to bring Doctor Geoff Earnshaw back into it. "We just can't say for sure how acupuncture affects sleep disorder," he says. "What is very well known is the power of the placebo: 20 per cent of the efficacy of any treatment is placebo." Anything more concrete would be hard to bet on. But that's just me: people swear by the power of the needle. It's worth going for a consultation just in case you turn out to be one of them.

ACUPUNCTURE | HOW IT WORKS

The aim of acupuncture is to regulate and bolster the flow of "vital" energy, called Qi, and the circulation of blood.

About 2,000 different acupuncture points lie along the body on pathways called energy meridians. Stimulating these points is meant to relieve obstructions in the flow of energy thereby allowing the body to get on with its business.

Acupuncture is a stimulus directed to certain responsive parts of the nervous system, producing the needling sensation and setting off a biochemical cascade believed to enhance healing.

For ailments such as back pain and PMS, Western medicine recognises that acupuncture can help by powerfully modulating nerve signals.

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