

## **Acupuncture in Demand By Cancer Patients**

Acupuncture for cancer patients is gaining popularity at a time when medical research on the complementary therapy is also on the rise nationwide, researchers say.

"There has been an explosion of research in the area of acupuncture," says Lorenzo Cohen, Ph.D., associate professor in M. D. Anderson's Departments of Behavioral Science and Palliative Care & Rehabilitation Medicine, and director of the institution's Integrative Medicine Program. "The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, for instance, awarded a number of grants this past fall to several acupuncture studies. This included a \$5.9 million grant to Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard University, to use neuro-imaging to understand the mechanisms of acupuncture."

At M. D. Anderson, acupuncture services are expanding this month to meet a growing patient demand as well, says Joseph Chiang, M.D., an anesthesiologist and professor in the Department of Anesthesiology who also is an acupuncturist. For the last five years, Chiang has offered acupuncture treatments to patients through a weekly clinic at the cancer center.

To accommodate more people, acupuncture services are moving to the M. D. Anderson's Place . of wellness. "The need is much higher than what we could handle before, and most people need more frequent treatments," Chiang says.

### Side effects relief

Patients seek acupuncture, he adds, because it gives them varying levels of relief from the effects of cancer treatments.

Those side effects include:

- a.. Fatigue
- b.. Nausea
- c.. Headache
- d.. Insomnia
- e.. Muscle ache
- f.. Constipation and diarrhea
- g.. Hiccapping (a side effect of radiation)
- h.. Hot flashes (a side effect of chemotherapy)

"Acupuncture will not cure cancer, but it may improve immune function," Chiang says. "It helps patients with those treatment-related side effects so they can continue to receive their cancer treatment. Maybe some side effects can be treated by western

medicines, but a lot of times patients are already on so many medicines that they don't want to take more drugs, plus the drugs can be more expensive."

Acupuncture is the practice of piercing specific points on the body with thin needles to unblock "energy" obstructions that can cause discomfort or pain. Touted for thousands of years as a successful traditional Chinese preventive practice and treatment, acupuncture is based upon an ancient practice of regulating qi (pronounced "chee") - the source of energy believed to circulate both inside and outside the body.

#### Patient issues

Some insurance companies cover the costs of acupuncture, but many do not. Another issue cancer patients need to be aware of is talking to their doctor before receiving acupuncture.

Previous research studies have shown that acupuncture is safe for cancer patients, but some people with special conditions may need to abstain, Chiang says.

Caution should be taken with patients in the following situations:

- a.. Heavy chemotherapy dosages
- b.. Infection
- c.. Skin lesions
- d.. Fever
- e.. Flap reconstruction
- f.. Bone marrow transplants

All M. D. Anderson cancer patients requesting acupuncture must receive a formal referral from their oncologist in order to receive the complementary therapy, Chiang says.

Many cancer patients, in general, feel encouraged to undergo acupuncture treatments due to research that has confirmed its benefits. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Consensus Conference conducted in 1997, in fact, stated that clear evidence supports the positive effects of acupuncture in the control of chemotherapy-related nausea and vomiting.

As findings from acupuncture research continue to grow and become public, they fuel interest in cancer patients and the general public. "Every time I speak about acupuncture at M. D. Anderson I receive lots of calls and requests," Chiang says. "In the past I had to turn people away because I didn't have the time to see them. With our added services, now we won't have to do that."