

**WORKSHOP REPORT
“ACUPUNCTURE AND SCIENCE:
FUNDAMENTAL CONTRADICTION
OR CREATIVE TENSION” MARCH
5TH 2001**

Organized by the British Acupuncture Council and the Department of Complementary Medicine, Exeter University, this workshop brought together practitioners from the British Medical Acupuncture Society, the Acupuncture Association of Chartered Physiotherapists and British Acupuncture Council. The day was a fascinating exploration of many different perspectives in acupuncture research. Dr Peter Fenwick chaired the day with humour and warmth, helping bridge the largely imagined gap between academic and practitioner researchers.

Edzard Ernst was the first to make a presentation, outlining a ‘pyramid’ of evidence from a broad base of uncontrolled data to a peak of systematic reviews and meta-analysis. He presented the results of his meta-analysis of acupuncture for low back pain, summarizing the conclusion as ‘cautiously positively’. However, he raised more questions than answers when he discussed the Cochrane review led by Van Tulder of Holland. This systematic review evaluated more or less the same clinical trials of acupuncture and low back pain, however, its conclusions were ‘cautiously negative.’ Given that systematic reviews were presented as the peak of the evidence pyramid, concerns were raised about how two experienced groups of reviewers, assessing more or less the same trials, should come to opposite conclusions.

Hugh MacPherson, the next speaker, presented some methodological challenges to the randomized controlled trial. Explanatory trials are useful in separating the specific from the non-specific effects of acupuncture. However, drawbacks of this type of trial can include the wider consequences of patient blinding and insufficiently flexible treatment protocols. As a result, explanatory trials tend to underestimate the effect of treatment on outcome. As an alternative, pragmatic trials are useful in establishing the overall benefits of normal clinical practice. In these trials, patients can be active participants and the practitioners can utilize the full range of their treatment repertoire. As a result pragmatic trials evaluate the outcome of what practitioners would see as optimal clinical conditions. Hugh presented interim results of the pragmatic randomized controlled York Acupuncture for Back Pain Trail.

Jongbae Park introduced us to the ‘Park’ needle, a fully retracting blunt needle for use in placebo-controlled studies. The aim of his work has been to

establish this sham needle as one that will be perceived and experienced as a real acupuncture needle by patients who have not received acupuncture before. His research into the credibility of the needle suggested that while patients do not think it is a sham needle, many are unsure if it is or if it isn’t. The results will soon be published.

In the afternoon, anthropologist and acupuncturist Volker Scheid presented a social view of science, medicine and acupuncture. In the West our ideas about acupuncture and Chinese medicine are limited by cultural and linguistic differences. Added to this is an unconscious Orientalism which has resulted in Westerners oversimplifying acupuncture to make it more accessible. Volker makes the case for research that is sensitive to the complexity of acupuncture in practice, where practitioners draw on a repertoire of treatment options, adapting their approach over time.

Adrian White introduced the important area of acupuncture safety. He presented the results of his survey of BMAS and AACP members, with 78 participants, all doctors and physiotherapists. In his survey, which covered over 30 000 treatments, 43 cases of significant adverse events were reported. His conclusion was that the risks associated with acupuncture are ‘minimal.’

The final presenter of the day was Carol Horner who outlined the role of audit and outcome studies in acupuncture research. Presenting results from her own work in the NHS and from several outcome studies involving British Acupuncture Council practitioners, she demonstrated both a high level of patient satisfaction and a positive series of clinical results from treatment. With two million treatments a year delivered by BAAC practitioners, she made a strong case for continuing to explore what sort of patients seek treatment, with what conditions and with what outcomes.

The day included two 1-h debates. In the morning the role of the randomized controlled trial was the focus, while, in the afternoon the discussion centred on ‘research in the real world.’ The contributions were always lively, demonstrating much common ground between members of the three professional organizations, united perhaps by a real passion for acupuncture. Clearly there were also tensions between different perspectives, a healthy and creative tension which added some exciting frisson to the day. Undoubtedly a success, the workshop helped to build the connections and friendships which may lead to future collaborations.

Hugh MacPherson

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