

East Meets West

By Richard Esquivel, L.Ac., MTCM

This is the fifth in a series of articles designed to educate the public on Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Today's article is the first in a two-part series which will focus on a typical visit to a licensed acupuncturist's office and what to expect on your first visit. Part two will focus on what to expect from a typical treatment.

What is a typical visit to an acupuncturist's office like?

For the most part, the initial visit to an acupuncturist's office is not unlike that of any other doctor's office visit. Upon completion of review of patient intake forms, the practitioner will ask the patient various questions regarding the present illness as well as past medical history. A practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) will ask about seemingly unrelated symptoms from a Western medical point of view which can provide important insight and information to the patient's condition and aid in the diagnostic process. A thorough knowledge of present symptoms and past history is an integral part of the formulation of the TCM diagnosis. The TCM practitioner will utilize four main methods of examination: inquiry, inspection, listening and palpation. (See my article in the Nov. 2002 issue on Diagnosis.) The practitioner will visually observe many aspects of the patient's body, including the patient's tongue, looking for different qualities in the tongue body and coat. The practitioner will palpate not only the area of injury, but also the patient's radial pulses, again looking for qualitative information such as speed, strength, depth and overall quality of the pulse that will guide the practitioner to a diagnosis. The uniqueness of TCM diagnosis lies in the process of incorporating seemingly unrelated symptoms and signs into an overall pattern of the patient's condition which emerges during the course of a thorough examination. Western medical diagnostic tools are often utilized as well and the practitioner may elect to measure blood pressure, listen to the patient's breathing or heartbeat with a stethoscope, or look into the patient's eyes or ears with an ophthalmoscope or otoscope. Articulation of the joints is often assessed, such as in musculoskeletal conditions, and the examiner may measure movement or range of motion of a joint, strength of muscles in an affected area or evaluate patient reflexes. Upon completion of the examination, the practitioner may refer the patient for additional diagnostic imaging, electrodiagnostic testing, lab work, or consultation with Western specialty medical doctors in order to confirm or rule out suspected medical conditions, particularly for complicated or acute conditions and for all urgent care. As primary care providers, licensed acupuncturists have been trained to recognize the conditions that Oriental Medicine can best treat effectively, to recognize conditions that require careful supervision of treatment by a medical doctor, and to recognize conditions that need immediate referral to emergency healthcare services.

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