

Medicine that's Human and Personal, Old and Wise

At a meeting of congressional women on Capitol Hill, TAI's Dean of Faculty explains traditional acupuncture—what it offers the individuals it serves and the whole of American health care. **BY JANE GRISSMER**

Jane Grissmer spoke to members of major health and women's organizations, members of Congress and the diplomatic community, their spouses and staff, at "Healthy Women 2000: Conference on Mind/Body Health," on July 11, 1996. The U.S. Public Health Service Office of Women's Health sponsored the event in collaboration with the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues, and the Center for Mind-Body Medicine. The following is the text of her talk:

I want to talk with you today about a system of medicine, a system of healing that I have studied and worked with for 20 years, first as a patient, then as a practitioner, and now also as an educator. Since I have 10 minutes to explain a 5000-year-old tradition with a body of knowledge that keeps growing, I have to talk very fast! Remember the words of Confucius—a journey of 10,000 miles begins with the first step? Here goes.

Let's suppose you are a patient. If I asked you to tell me about nagging symptoms or complaints you've experienced, your list might include the following:

- chronic fatigue
- tiredness at certain times of day
- irregularity of a body rhythm and function (sleep, appetite, digestion, elimination, menstruation, body temperature, perspiration)
- craving certain foods
- seasonal illnesses or affective disorders
- mood and temperament imbalances
- chronic flus and colds
- body aches and pains

If you were to take these complaints to your doctor, she might say she finds you in good health, or the symptoms are of unknown origin, or the only treatment is continuous use of medication.

Acupuncturists look at these kinds of symptoms in a different way. We see them as early warning signals. And we see a chance to help you by addressing them now, by

balancing the systems that have gone awry. Left untreated, these warning signals may lead to pathology or illness. If heeded, they are the greatest prevention against disease. The premise of acupuncture is to treat *now*—before pathology or illness arises.

In an acupuncture examination we pay special attention to the connections among sets of symptoms affecting one's body, and—this is important—one's mind and spirit. I witness every day the healing force that results when one is aware of the interconnections of the physical, mental, and spiritual. Here are a few examples from my practice:

- chronic shoulder pain that arose when a woman lost her father. (In Chinese medicine the shoulder area is associated with the emotion of grief.)
- insomnia that appeared after the breakup of an intimate relationship. (In Chinese medicine the heart plays a primary role in settling our spirit at night.)
- anemia, followed by the woman's loss of her self-esteem. (In Chinese medicine the blood is associated with anger and our capacity to "stand up and fill out" our space in life.)

As women, we often instinctively sense a connection between symptoms, although we can't explain it. Traditional Oriental medicine has never separated mind and body. In the acupuncture view, for example:

The heart is not just a blood pump; the heart also governs our capacity for joy, our sense of purpose in life, and our connectedness with others.

The kidneys provide for the filtration of fluids; they also govern the capacity for fear, our will, our motivation, and our faith in life.



Jane Grissmer

The lungs breathe in air; and they govern our capacity to grieve, as well as our acknowledgment of self and others.

The liver stores the blood; it also governs our capacity for anger, as well as our vision and creativity.

The stomach plays a role in digestion of food; it also governs our capacity for thoughtfulness and kindness, for nourishing ourself and others.

These are just a few of the mind-body connections that acupuncture recognizes. The theoretical foundation of this medicine is a sophisticated system of correspondences based on a subtle understanding of the laws of resonance—in nature and in ourselves.

This resonance occurs in our bodies in channels running from head to toe. Energy flows through these channels, connecting one system to another. The Chinese call this energy “chi.” It is the same vital substance that flows through all living things in the universe. Most patients, after a while, come to recognize the subtle sensation that occurs when this chi is accessed in treatment.

We access the chi through a system of points along the channels—points that have been used for centuries. After 16 years of practice, it is still a beauty and a wonder to me that I am able to touch a point near the ankle and see back pain ease and the patient relax. Or treat a point in the palm of the hand and see palpitations stop and the patient smile.

How do acupuncturists know which points to access? We diagnose through a trained use of our senses: through touch, the sound of the person’s voice, the color of her face, the odor of her body, the “shape” of her pulse as it flows at her wrist. We learn to “read” 12 different pulses—six on each wrist—each of which correlates to an aspect of the body, the mind, and the spirit.

Acupuncture is a very human medicine, and it is highly personal. Each of you is unique, and the context of your life is unique. Each time you are treated, the treatment is individually designed for you.

The acupuncture points themselves are metaphors for the patient’s journey through life. The Chinese gave the points names such as “Spirit Gate,” “Great Esteem,” “Joining the

Valleys,” “Inner Frontier Gate.” Each of these points has a clearly defined therapeutic action.

Acupuncture provides basic maintenance and life care. It is about living in harmony with the nature in us and around us. Not only is it one of the oldest systems of healing available to us today, it is also one of the wisest.

In a recent national survey of acupuncture users conducted by the research team at the Traditional Acupuncture Institute, 90 percent of patients reported that their symptoms disappeared or improved after treatment. Of those who said they

still had a condition, many said they now found it easier to live with. The improvements people experienced were physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social (they got along better with others, missed work less). Eighty-four percent said they saw their medical doctors less often; 79 percent said they used fewer prescription drugs; 71 percent said they avoided surgery. According to reports

of these patients, acupuncture costs about 60 percent as much as care by physicians. And patients repeatedly praised their practitioners for teaching them self-care and attentiveness to both their bodies and inner selves. Interestingly, 75 percent of the users at these clinics were highly educated women with technical, professional, or entrepreneurial jobs. Most were ages 30 to 60, and most lived in cities or suburbs.

As we look at the *economics* of national health care—and all of us do—we would do well to look to the models that are low in technology and preventive in nature. As we look at the *spirit* of national health care, we would do well to look to systems such as I have described: systems that are patient-centered, that teach us how to discover what our symptoms tell us about our needs, and—importantly—systems that teach us how to take better care of our inner and outer selves.

Jane Grissmer, M.Ac.(UK), Dipl.Ac.(NCCA), Dipl. Herbology (NCCA), is Dean of Faculty at the Traditional Acupuncture Institute. She is founder and codirector of Crossings: A Center for the Healing Traditions in Silver Spring, Maryland, where she practices acupuncture.

What acupuncture can offer national health care:

- low in technology
- preventive in nature
- patient-centered
- teaches us how to take care of ourselves