

Acupuncture in humanitarian work

With the situations in Haiti and Chile fresh in our minds we ask – what part can we play as acupuncturists in the relief effort? **Jo Bond**'s final-year research dissertation sheds light



Although there is a wealth of research on international humanitarian aid, there is very scant research and knowledge about how acupuncturists are currently

working in this field, and the potential acupuncture has to contribute positively to humanitarian work globally.

My research set out to identify the motivations and intentions of acupuncturists engaged in humanitarian situations, and to explore the main issues that impact on the effectiveness and appropriateness of acupuncture used across different countries and cultures affected by crisis.

The global and philosophical views that were expressed about the use of acupuncture for humanitarian work were among the most interesting ideas that came out of talking to participants.

One participant expressed the opinion that humanitarian acupuncture is 'a very pure manifestation of why people get into acupuncture as a profession'. I understood this to mean that acupuncturists train to care for people with a desire to help them achieve higher levels of health. We, as practitioners of Chinese medicine, place great importance on the deeper aspects of *yin* and *yang*. We seek to find the source of the imbalance that

is causing the problem and to find a way to restore balance.

Disaster and post disaster situations were seen as '*yang* situations, which need the soothing *yin* healing aspect to balance them – part of the world balancing itself'. In this respect the acupuncturists are the *yin* healing aspect.

The same participant further stated that it had been part of his aim 'to export good intentions, compassion and skills with the effectiveness of acupuncture in treating trauma and emotional blockage'. Empathy with desire and intention for your patient to get better are very much part of the philosophy of acupuncture, and it can be seen as a natural progression for this to extend more widely to a world view.

It struck me that acupuncture has a unique way of understanding the world, people and illness. The holistic nature of acupuncture, treating the mind, body and spirit on an individual basis makes it a uniquely appropriate therapy to be used in communities that have been through traumatic events, or live in a state of anxiety due to chronic poverty or an uncertain future. The ability to reach the person at all levels when treating is highly valuable. This was well illustrated by one participant when she said 'acupuncture (as an energetic therapy) has a deeper understanding



Palestinian men receiving their first acupuncture treatment administered by World Medicine volunteers

of how people are...in situations where there have been dramatic energetic changes'. This is particularly important as people tend to somatise their experiences, especially if they are not from a culture where it is normal and acceptable to seek help for mental and emotional disturbance or distress. So where there is thought to be no cause in Western medical terms and therefore no cure, acupuncture works on a different level treating both the person and the root of the imbalance that is manifesting in signs and symptoms of ill health.

An interesting issue was raised as to how acupuncture projects brought in from outside a community could be culturally

appropriate for the people within the community. It seemed that a collaboration with local traditional healing practices might help Western practitioners to understand some of the distinct concepts of self and healing held by different communities. Some training took place with local healing traditions and amongst practitioners, such as teaching ayurveda students ear acupuncture, and getting traditional healers involved in projects. Overall there was some awareness that the intention should be to help preserve culturally embedded self concepts and effective traditional healing practices while at the same time offering something new and potentially very beneficial in acupuncture.

One participant said 'Traditional healers have participated in the training... a lot of traditional... forms of healing have commonality... they understand *qi*.' This idea that there is commonality is echoed in research that has found that acupuncture can appeal to people who use traditional medicine, as it seems less intimidating and more familiar somehow than some Western medicines (references available in full dissertation document). However it was unclear how much shared learning there was and whether there was an openness for further collaboration to achieve better and more appropriate treatments for the communities.

Lack of local knowledge and understanding can be a hindrance, as was described by one participant in Nepal trying to understand the impact of the patients' medication in Chinese medicine terms. 'We spoke to local herbalists but couldn't find common names for plants.' He also explained how they had tried to use a so-called universal pain scale, only to find it wasn't so universal and the community didn't understand – more experience and understanding of the culture and language may have led to culturally appropriate methods of measuring.

Aid or opportunity?

The practitioners I spoke to were keen to point out the great benefits they gained in terms of learning and experience from their voluntary aid work. I find it personally inspiring to consider how acupuncture as a profession might benefit from this type of work, in

terms of raising its public profile, increasing research, showcasing its effectiveness for different people across diverse settings, and demonstrating its cost effectiveness. These benefits could combine to encourage integration with Western and other models of healing.

In conclusion, although there are clearly challenges to acupuncture being used in a humanitarian way, I was left with the impression that acupuncture, by its very nature and in what and how it can treat, is a therapy that has very positive potential for being beneficial in communities affected by crisis. If acupuncturists can bring an holistic awareness to their practice (as they do with their treatment) and apply this to looking at the whole situation when treating globally within culturally different communities, then acupuncture can make very positive and appropriate contributions. Especially when used along humanitarian lines to bring health benefits and healing to communities suffering from the effects of disasters and chronic poverty.

Jo Bond recently qualified from the College of Integrated Chinese Medicine and is now practising as an acupuncturist in Bristol. Her previous studies of developing nations and experiences while travelling led to an interest in humanitarian work, and her dissertation completed as part of her acupuncture degree provided the ideal opportunity to explore the part acupuncture could play in this.