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Does acupuncture really work?

A new study has found 'little convincing evidence' that the therapy reduces pain during labor, prompting renewed debate about the value of the practice

BY DENIS CAMPBELL
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Pregnant women hoping to give birth without drugs have been known to adopt any number of natural remedies, from water baths to self-hypnosis and extreme screaming, to minimize the agony of labor. But a study published yesterday finds there is no evidence that acupuncture, another popular complementary therapy, reduces the pain of childbirth.

Experts say growing numbers of pregnant women are turning to the practice, which involves needles being inserted into the skin to relieve pain. But research suggests it does not work during labor.

The finding, which has already prompted a vigorous debate about the value of acupuncture, came from British and South Korean researchers who examined previous studies of its use in labor.

"The results show that there is little convincing evidence that women who had acupuncture experienced less labor pain than those who received no pain relief, a conventional analgesia, a placebo or sham acupuncture," researchers told *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*. The journal is owned by the UK's Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which represents most of the UK's doctors specializing in childbirth and maternity care.

Edzard Ernst, of the Peninsula medical school at Exeter and Plymouth Universities, England, and co-author of the report, said: "The effects of acupuncture perceived by women are largely due to placebo. Acupuncture has many qualities that maximize placebo effects: it involves touch and is invasive and, psychologically, is attached to the mysticism of the East."

Philip Steer, *BJOG's* editor-in-chief, said labor pain can be so intense that a woman would do anything to minimize it.

"Acupuncture is a drug-free approach and that may explain why some women prefer its use during labor. This review shows that in a very small number of cases acupuncture may be of help, usually for short periods of time after treatment, and this may be down to psychological rather than a physiological effect. Generally the consensus is that the evidence does not support its use."

The only benefits were 11 percent less pain in the first 30 minutes after receiving acupuncture and a need for less pharmacological pain relief, the authors say.

The researchers found that acupuncture did not seem to be any more effective than sham acupuncture, conventional drug-induced pain relief or no pain relief. When women reported the amount of pain they were feeling while using acupuncture, it was similar to the pain levels recounted by women using these other methods.

But critics said the research ignored the real benefits that women in labor felt they had received. Sarah Budd, a midwife and acupuncturist at the Derriford hospital in Plymouth, England, said that as a practicing acupuncturist and midwife she had seen very good results when using acupuncture for pain relief during labor.

"Our experience is that women are looking for alternatives to drugs and intervention such as epidurals, and certainly the women I have treated report a very high satisfaction rate from acupuncture treatment during labor with very little use of other pain relief methods," she said.

Siobhain Freegard, co-founder of the Netmums Web site, said it was more important that some women who used acupuncture found it useful than that it was scientifically proven to work.

"If acupuncture helps a woman endure the pain of childbirth and feel more relaxed and more in control of what's happening to her, then it's worthwhile, even if those benefits are mainly psychological," she said.

Mike O'Farrell, chief executive of the British Acupuncture Council, said: "We're surprised by these findings as previous trials, along with the evidence that our members see in their practices every day, suggest that acupuncture can be effective in providing pain relief in many different circumstances."



A patient controls the flow of electricity to acupuncture needles during treatment at the Royal Homeopathic Hospital in London.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Discredited therapies

- ▶ The British Fertility Society said in February there was no evidence that acupuncture could aid fertility
- ▶ A study at Middlesex University, England, into aromatherapy showed it was ineffective as pain relief, calling it "bunkum"
- ▶ Harvard Medical School found Chinese herbal medicine *danshen* (丹参) had no positive effects for stroke victims
- ▶ Homeopathy was discredited in a *Swiss Lancet*-published study in 2005

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TT: In *The Cove* an interviewee stated that one of the reasons the Japanese government doesn't stop whaling is basically because they don't want to be told by other countries what to do. For example, after the International Whaling Commission placed a moratorium on commercial whale hunts [in 1986], they continued to slaughter whales, which they said was for scientific research. Do you think that films like *The Cove* and the action of foreign activists and governments might actually make the Japanese government dig in their heels even further concerning the hunting of whales and dolphins?

RO: I don't know. I don't know what they think for the same reason I don't know what you are thinking. I just know that ... look, I'm just one

guy. I don't sit on the right hand side of God and have a solution for all these problems. I see this extreme cruelty, I see people being denied the right to know that they are eating contaminated dolphin meat and we do what we can do about it.

It used to be that the Aztec Indians ripped out the heart of [human sacrifice] victims while they were still beating and that was a tradition in their culture, but it doesn't mean it was okay. It was our culture and our tradition to not allow women the right to vote. It was our tradition to own slaves, but [that] doesn't make it okay. So we changed and now as a result of that change, a black man is president of the United States and a lot of the people who got him there were women voters. So change is good sometimes. They can't cling to that tradition and culture.

And by the way, the way they kill dolphins in Taiji has only been going on since 1933 [when motorized boats



Ric O'Barry with his wife Helene and their daughter Mai Li.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RIC O'BARRY

were introduced]. Motorized boats are not traditional. Many years ago they used canoes with spears and they would kill a whale for the village. So when they say [the dolphin drive] is [Japanese] tradition and culture, it's hard to believe that after you interview a hundred people in Tokyo who have no idea it's going on.

TT: I'm curious because there were two Taiji councilmen [Junichiro Yamashita and Hisato Ryono] featured in *The Cove* who spoke out against dolphin meat being served in schools because of the mercury in it, and that led to the meat being removed from school lunches. Do you know what kind of reactions they got from other councilmen?

RO: I do. I stay in touch with them. Mr Ryono is still in Taiji. He is like the vice mayor now and the spokesman, he flip-flopped and changed his story [Ryono has since

said he was misled by filmmakers into appearing in *The Cove*]. Mr Yamashita is the real hero in this story. He was born in Taiji, he lived there all of his life and he had to leave. He was ostracized. He's now driving a taxicab outside of Tokyo. He should be the minister for the environment and someday he will be a national hero in Japan, once this movie gets seen and people realize that he is a national hero. They don't know who he is because they haven't seen this movie. There were some people in Minamata in the 1950s that spoke out against the government and the Chisso factory and they too were ostracized, but today they are national heroes. It's going to take some time before Mr Yamashita is recognized.

ON THE NET:

Ric O'Barry: www.savejapandolphins.org
The Cove: www.thecovemovie.com
Urban Nomad Film Festival: urbannomadfilmfest.blogspot.com