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Acupuncture Patients Take Control Of Their Lives

by Robert M. Duggan

The *New England Journal of Medicine* reports an amazing fact: Americans spend as much out of pocket on alternative medicine as they do for mainstream health care.

Why? What value do they seek that makes them willing to expend the extra money when, by all reports, their expenses for health insurance and mainstream care already are out of control?

We hear the debate about healthcare economics framed as a three-sided dilemma: How do we maintain quality, control costs and expand access? Perhaps the dilemma contains an unexamined assumption about what we expect from the product we all call "health care."

In the first large-scale study of patients using traditional acupuncture in this country, patients reported high levels of satisfaction with their treatment. Nearly 600 patients at six different clinics attributed positive changes in a variety of symptoms to their acupuncture treatments.

The study was conducted by Claire Cassidy, a respected researcher with a Ph.D. in human biology and 20 years of experience in medical anthropology. She is director of Research for the Traditional Acupuncture Institute. The research was funded by Chevron, Inc., [The Rouse Company](#), T. Rowe Price, Ryland Group, First Maryland Bank and individual donors.

Acupuncture patients reported they:

- Reduced their use of over-the-counter and prescription drugs

- Consulted medical doctors less often
- Filed fewer insurance claims.

Patients report their overall health was better, and they experienced improvements in their relationships. Some reported they had less pain or avoided surgery after treatment with acupuncture.

More than four out of five patients reported that their symptoms either improved or disappeared completely after acupuncture treatment. Among patients who came to treatment to help them recover from substance abuse or infections, nearly half reported their symptoms disappeared completely.

Not all patients who were satisfied with their treatment said their symptoms disappeared. Many said they were better able to live with their complaints and took more personal responsibility for taking care of their health. Patients said they formed strong bonds with their practitioners and that these connections were important to the outcome of their treatment.

This redefines what we ask of health care and what we spend our healthcare dollars on. Traditional medical research evaluates a treatment by its effect on a disease. This study looked at how patients believed their treatment affected them.

Over the years, acupuncture patients have said strange things. "I never thought asthma would be my friend," one man said. "I used to be in and out of emergency rooms and on heavy doses of medication. Now, at the first touch of asthma, I realize I'm letting my life get out of control -- not getting enough sleep, eating poorly, not exercising, not dealing with a fight I've had with my wife." The man had begun to think differently about "health" and "health care."

Not every pain or illness can be deemed a "friend"; this story points to questions critical to the healthcare financing debate. Is health care designed to eliminate all pain and suffering and death? (About one quarter of our nation's health costs are used to extend life by perhaps six months -- and many question the quality of life in that extended time.)

While the research shows that 90 percent of the patients in this study experienced a reduction or elimination of symptoms, it also shows -- perhaps more importantly -- that they gained greater understanding of how to live with their "disease," how not to be victim to it and how to take care of themselves as they go on living fully.

The head of personnel at one of the top Fortune 20 companies said, "I have a thousand employees out sick every day. My goal is to keep them away from doctors. When they go to doctors, they wind up with all sorts of expensive tests." He said that 70 percent of these people may need a vacation, or they may need something else, but they don't need to be caught in the medical system.

The head of benefits at a major financial company put it this way, "We have a

young population in our company. The average age is about 33, and most of them are not yet involved in the medical system. I want to keep it that way. I want acupuncturists to come in and be part of our health fairs, write articles in our newsletters, attend brown-bag lunches for our employees. I want you to sponsor T'AI CHI and yoga and other exercise events, because I am quite sure that if we do those things, we will not enter the mainstream of high medical costs."

He's motivated by the economics of this self-care, preventive approach -- he wants to cut healthcare costs -- yet there's more to it than that. We know from Dr. Cassidy's research and the work of others that when people learn they can take care of themselves, they feel more in control of their lives -- and that often leads to better morale and fewer sick days. Moreover, the practitioners they consult often teach them about exercise and diet and other things that enhance their quality of life. So when they do go to work, they are more awake, more aware, more excited about living life.

From the point of view of employee satisfaction and from the point of view of cutting medical costs and cutting absenteeism, there are economic benefits right across the board for shareholders and managers.

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