

“Getting my life back”: How acupuncture improved quality of life for one woman with breast cancer related lymphoedema

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Introduction

Acupuncture is an unusual treatment for people with lymphoedema, with fears that it may lead to increased swelling or infection. Furthermore, most research studies focus on acupuncture's effect on a single symptom, thereby overlooking the beneficial effects on overall wellbeing that are observed frequently in clinic.

“Ann” participated in research investigating using acupuncture in the management of lymphoedema. Her story illustrates the wide range of benefits that can result from acupuncture treatment. Keen to share her experience, Ann has consented to using her anonymised case details.

Background

Ann, age 60, had undergone surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy for breast cancer diagnosed 9 years previously. Lymphoedema developed in her left arm soon after surgery, and has since been managed by the lymphoedema service. Of her five adult children, two were living at home; the youngest has a learning disability requiring Ann's constant care. Swelling of Ann's arm restricted daily activities. A seamstress, she was no longer able to sew, and daily tasks such as cooking were time consuming and challenging.

Lymphoedema related symptoms

- Heaviness of the arm
- Constant pain in the shoulder
- Fingers “like sausages”
- Inability to grip

Physical condition

- Insomnia: 0-4 hours sleep a night
- Frequent terrifying nightmares
- 5 stone overweight
- Fear of further weight gain
- Poor diet: often going “a couple of days without eating”
- Fatigue
- Constipation
- Frequent headaches

Psychosocial condition

- Anxiety
- Guilt about surviving cancer
- Loss of confidence
- Social embarrassment
- Poor body image
- Frustration

Prior to her cancer diagnosis, Ann was comfortable with herself. Now she felt “emotionally off balance” and “lost somewhere”. She put the needs of others before her own, becoming a “doormat” to her large family.

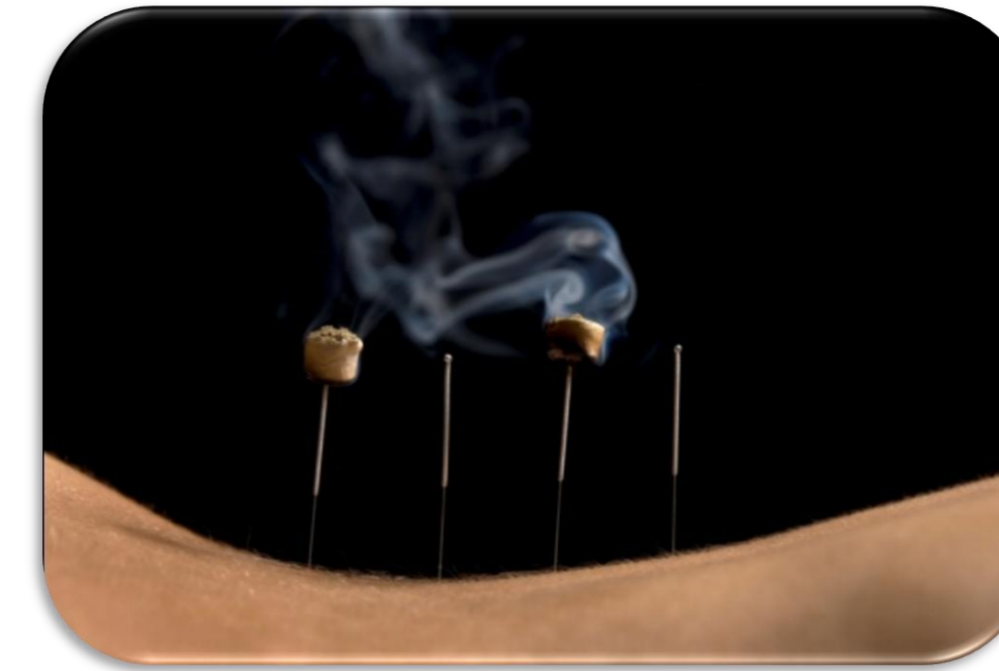
“Constant pain...lack of grip...makes you feel out of control...off balance. Some days I could cheerfully chop off my arm. It's ugly. It's a constant reminder of the cancer.”



Treatment

Ann's treatment priorities

- Relief of pain in the arm
- To “get back in balance”
- To improve confidence
- To be able to sew



Treatment regimen

A licensed acupuncturist administered 13 traditional acupuncture treatments over 16 weeks, tailored to Ann's presenting symptoms and treatment priorities. Moxibustion, a smouldering herb used to warm acupuncture points, supplemented acupuncture needling. Acupuncture points changed as Ann progressed through treatment.

Needling was avoided in the arm and torso quadrant on the affected side. Acupuncture was an adjunct to usual care, and did not aim to treat the lymphoedema. Ann continued her regular maintenance treatment at the Mount Vernon Lymphoedema Service.

Progress through treatment

After 3 treatments:

Ann reported the following changes:

- Arm felt less heavy and softer
- Pain in shoulder disappeared
- Discomfort reduced to “nagging ache” in forearm
- Improved ability to grip
- Able to complete a small sewing project
- Increased energy
- More positive attitude to life

Over the remaining 10 treatments:

- Continued improvement in arm sensation and ability to grip
- Improved ability to cope
- Better sleep patterns; very few nightmares
- Healthier eating habits; 10 pound weight loss “without dieting!”
- Regular bowel movements
- Continued increases in energy
- Improved confidence
- Less anxiety; less guilt about surviving cancer

“I feel in control of my life. My arm is not so heavy. Pain is less and I have much better movement and control of my fingers – I am able to sew and am less clumsy. I feel more positive. I feel much calmer.”

Setbacks

Progress through treatment was remarkable, but not straightforward. Improvements of the first three treatments seemed to be setback by acute episodes of sciatica, low back pain and flu. Although frustrating, these gave Ann the opportunity to put her needs ahead of others. She began to delegate tasks to her family, established boundaries, and stopped pushing herself to keep going. She gave herself permission to look after herself.

Improved self-care

Ann developed cellulitis three weeks after the end of treatment. The Lymphoedema Nurse Specialist confirmed that this was not related to acupuncture treatment. Ann's own response to this emergency illustrates how she had changed during her course of acupuncture:

“Normally I put off going to the doctor until things are really bad. This time I had the confidence to request an urgent appointment and get prompt treatment. I feel this is due to the acupuncture/moxibustion treatment I received.”

Long-term feedback

Ann continued to enjoy benefits. Twelve weeks after treatment ended, her arm still felt lighter, she could cope better with any pain, finger movement was still good, and she was able to do fine sewing work. Emotionally, she felt “much stronger and more positive – I have regained my self-confidence.”

Discussion

Ann's case illustrates acupuncture's potential to facilitate improvements in wellbeing. Treatment enabled Ann to process difficult emotions related to cancer, and to get her “life back in balance”. She was also enabled to “deal with symptoms in a more positive way”, essential for managing a chronic incurable condition like lymphoedema.

“Family and friends have noticed the change and say I am now like ‘my old self’.”



Acknowledgements

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Research for Innovation, Speculation and Creativity (RISC) programme funded this study. Collaborators include Professor Christine Moffatt, International Lymphoedema Framework Project; Anita Wallace, Lymphoedema Support Network; Elaine Melsome, Mount Vernon Lymphoedema Service; Teresa Young and Professor E.J. Maher, Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre; and Rachel Peckham, MSc LicAc MBAcC.

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