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# The Experience of Receiving Traditional Chinese Acupuncture

A qualitative study involving women with breast cancer having treatment for the menopausal symptoms associated with Tamoxifen

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## Abstract

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### Background

This study aimed to evaluate the experience of women with breast cancer taking part in a study of traditional Chinese acupuncture for menopause-like symptoms associated with Tamoxifen.

### Methods

16 women took part in 4 focus groups at least 9 months after their last acupuncture treatment. Topics for discussion were agreed by the research acupuncturist. Groups were audio-taped, transcribed, and analysed using grounded techniques.

### Findings

The experience was positive for all participants. Some had long-term relief from menopausal and other symptoms, and even those with no symptomatic improvement felt better able to cope. Opinions were mixed about the role of the needles in this improvement, as opposed to non-specific effects.

### Conclusions

Traditional acupuncture is an acceptable treatment for women with menopause-like symptoms resulting from Tamoxifen. Patients found the overall experience enjoyable, and felt that their quality of life improved whether or not their symptoms were relieved.

### Key words

Acupuncture, focus groups, breast cancer, Tamoxifen

### Background

A recent pilot study of Chinese traditional acupuncture to treat the hot flushes and night sweats experienced by women with early breast cancer taking Tamoxifen showed very promising results.<sup>1</sup> In addition to a reduction in these symptoms, the study also showed an improvement in a range of measures of physical and emotional well-being.<sup>2</sup>

One of the aims of the acupuncture study was to determine the acceptability of acupuncture as a therapy for women

who have cancer and may therefore have negative experiences of needles. For this reason, although a wide range of measures were used and the study-specific questionnaire included some free text questions, the team thought it important to do some qualitative research with the patients. This was seen as the best way of identifying elements of the treatment which they saw as important, and of obtaining details of their thoughts and feelings about it.

## patients felt that their quality of life improved whether or not their symptoms were relieved

This paper describes the focus group study undertaken for this purpose.

### Methods

All 50 women who had completed the course of 8 treatments were sent a letter inviting them to come to one of a series of focus groups. A total of 16 women came to three groups (7, 5 and 4 respectively). All of them had had their last acupuncture treatment at least 9 months earlier. The groups were run by a facilitator independent of the original research; the questions for discussion had been agreed by the acupuncturist.

The groups were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis using techniques based on the principles of Grounded Theory<sup>3</sup>, involving detailed examination of the scripts to elicit themes, rather than searching for predetermined categories.

### Findings

Data from qualitative research must be organised by the researcher for systematic presentation. This is because in interviews and focus groups there will inevitably be digressions, and questions scheduled for later in the 'topic guide' may be answered within the answer to an earlier question. The data from this study are presented in the following order:

- Problems experienced before the treatment
- Anticipation and expectation
- Having the treatment
- Effects and what may have contributed to them
- Overall impression

### Problems experienced before the treatment

All those recruited into the original acupuncture study had been having at least four hot flushes/night sweats in 24 hours on a regular basis, but most were experiencing many more. This did not simply mean feeling hot, but was different in kind.

"To me it wasn't just like being hot, like if you're in a hot country or you're sweating because you've been busy or something, it was this suffocating thing. It was different, a new experience for me to get a hot flush, you know, it was, as I say, claustrophobic. A different kind of being hot." (Participant 1)

The flushes and sweats could be both embarrassing and extremely uncomfortable, as well as interfering with sleep, relationships and everyday life.

Some women regularly had to change clothing/underwear, and others were unable to wear what they regarded as 'normal' clothing.

"I've found that when I've got to work, my uniform is a sort of green nylon blouse, and to wear my blouse to work with a little cotton bit underneath because it's see-through, when I got to work I had to take it all off...And this is before I had the acupuncture. I would have to go in the toilets and change because I was already worn out, soaking wet." (Participant 3)

Flushes seemed to happen anywhere and at any time - even in the swimming pool - but were even worse in hot weather. Other triggers included red meat, chocolate, alcohol and spicy food.

In addition, several participants suffered from a range of other problems, which they perceived as Tamoxifen-related.

"Not just the hot flushes and night sweats, lots of other side effects as well." (Participant 12)

These included:

- weight gain
- aches and pains
- feeling of claustrophobia
- feeling 'low'
- tiredness and lethargy
- memory loss.

### Anticipation and expectation

Feelings about starting the treatment were varied. One woman had been surprised to have been offered acupuncture and was not sure what to expect, and others were 'curious' about it or simply pleased to have been offered hope.

"I have to say I was curious. I'd never had any experience of acupuncture. I had a completely open mind as to what it might or might not do. And it was curiosity as much as anything. Plus the fact that I was suffering." (Participant 12)



There were mixed expectations among the participants. Some were sceptical,

"I'd never had acupuncture before, and I'd always, I don't say dismissed it, but thought, Oh it's not for me." (Participant 14)

and whereas all were hoping that the acupuncture would help, few had strong belief in its efficacy.

"I just thought, I'll try it. I've never had it before but I'll try it." (Participant 13)

Three women described themselves either specifically as needle phobic or as being extremely anxious about needles, especially after their experience of chemotherapy.

"My first reaction was, I don't think I can cope with the needles, because after chemotherapy I now have this awful time giving blood, it's just dreadful, my veins." (Participant 10)

### Having the treatment

The creation of the therapeutic relationship had begun with

the initial interview, which the women found to be a very positive experience, although they were surprised by the examination of the tongue.

"Tremendous. Very detailed. I don't think it was quite what I expected but I found the whole thing quite relaxing actually. Driving home along the motorway, I mean, I was just floating, wonderful. Yes, good." (Participant 11)

There was considerable unanimity about having the treatment.

"I think she's a lovely lady, and from my own experience she did a wonderful job, and just spent time talking through things, talking about what she was doing. And it was all so interesting and so simple that it was very easy to just sort of come and do it. And no pain, which was great, because I must admit, since the chemo I've been very wary of needles. And she just made things a pleasure and I think I really did go to sleep one day." (Participant 10)

All the women found the acupuncture relaxing and enjoyable, and some commented specifically about the lack of pain from the needles.



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"For the first one she put 15 needles in my back and I didn't feel anything, I just didn't know she'd done it. Because I remember asking "How many are you going to use?" and she said "I'll tell you when I've finished." And, yes, there were 15!" (Participant 11)

However, one had found the needles in her feet painful, and another joked that the therapist had been particularly excited when a needle caused discomfort.

"I think the most painful were in my feet. Where there's less flesh." (Participant 14)

"Well she quite likes it to hurt, doesn't she, she gets all excited?" (Participant 16)

Some found the treatment so relaxing that they were unfit to drive home without having a break and a hot drink first. They found themselves looking forward to the next treatment to see what would happen and how they would feel.

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They made glowing comments about the therapist herself, and had appreciated her combination of caring and professionalism.

"And I think she was a person who was involved with you but, in a way, not involved. And, in fact, she was interested in you but only in a temporary way. And I rather felt that was comforting, that somebody was involved with me, although it was on a temporary basis." (Participant 15)

In addition, some participants commented that coming for the treatment had been an incentive to do something when feeling lethargic.

"But it was something positive to do about the lethargy, not wanting to do anything you'd get up and think, "You're going." (Participant 3)

"And I think once you know it's starting to help then you've got more drive." (Participant 6)

### **Effects and what may have contributed to them**

The full results of the study have been reported elsewhere.<sup>1,2</sup> However, these women were all at least nine months from their last acupuncture treatment, and so it was interesting to note that several of them not only had immediate symptomatic relief from their hot flushes and night sweats, but that these had in some cases persisted.

"When I first came, the flushes were about 30-plus a day and it reduced it very quickly to about ten which is much more manageable... much, much better. Night times are still my worst time between sort of midnight and 4.00am. I've never found anything to sort it. But the acupuncture has just done so much to make life bearable." (Participant 11)

In addition to improvement in menopausal symptoms, women also experienced relief from other problems including **sleep disturbance,**

I found that (it) actually boosted my energy levels 100% ... it was the general ache, and having to drag myself out of bed like a 90 year old was almost as bad as the sweats. And plus, my husband and I weren't sleeping in the same bed because I'd get up at 2.00 am and go into the spare room because it was cooler. And I got up the next morning and I sort of sprung out of the bed like a 20 year old, it was wonderful." (Participant 1)

### **lethargy,**

"I was feeling down, feeling lethargic, no zip, no, you know, no get up and go, sort of apathetic, all those things, and it certainly helped that. (Participant 3)

### **general aches and pains,**

"I suffer from quite aching legs and although it didn't disappear she (the acupuncturist) did target it and it did relieve it. So I don't know if anybody else has it?" (Participant 4)

"I had that (stiff knees) before I was on Tamoxifen but she did seem to concentrate on that a bit, and whether it's psychological I'm not sure, but my knees are fine, fantastic." (Participant 5)

### **and taste changes.**

"When I first went to the doctor I'd had the most awful taste in my mouth. I'd cover my mouth with people. And it didn't matter what I did, mouthwashes, toothpaste, nothing made a difference...and that went completely after about four treatments." (Participant 6)



Even those who had no symptomatic improvement felt that they had benefited from the treatment. They felt that their understanding of the symptoms had increased, and with it their ability to 'take control' of their lives.

"I felt more able, I think, to cope with things." (Participant 16)

"That's the difference that B (the acupuncturist) made to me, she made me a bit more understanding of this and now I don't need to, I say I apologise, but I don't need to apologise really, I just say "Excuse me, I'm dealing with other things","" (Participant 14)

Some had learned to control their flushes using relaxation techniques, and others felt that learning about the philosophy underlying the therapy had helped them. There was some discussion about what the women believed had contributed to the effects of the treatment. On the whole, people had come with open minds, and for some the effectiveness had been a surprise.

"I didn't know. I had a fascination for wanting to know, but I wasn't one of these people who is a strong advocate of it, or

dismissed it. I was somewhere in the middle. So, yes, it was a trial for me as well." (Participant 15)

"Most impressed. I didn't really think it would." (Participant 11)

Some were sure that the needling had had a major impact.

"When you don't really understand it you can't actually see how somebody poking you with needles gets rid of your hot flushes and makes you feel so good. And it did." (Participant 15)

One woman compared the acupuncture very favourably with aromatherapy.

"I mean I have aromatherapy and I still do and that's undivided attention and more hands-on and, although it makes you feel wonderful, it doesn't do anything for the symptoms, it just makes you feel good. So that's the 'feel good' factor if you like. But the acupuncture, it was more than one (therapy) which was wonderful having." (Participant 10)

However, many of them also felt that the total package was responsible for their improvement, and that the elements could

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not be separated out. They were insistent that the personality and demeanour of the therapist were an essential ingredient.

"But the needles, if they'd just been done mechanically, would have, I don't think, had the same effect at all." (Participant 14)

"Well I said this when she asked me to, sort of, sum up what I thought and I think it's just, really, that somebody cares about you and spends half an hour, whatever the time was, with you and it's not medical. (Participant 11)

some felt that the  
treatment had enabled them  
to feel more in control by  
teaching them techniques  
for dealing with the flushes

It also offered the opportunity of a break from everyday cares.

"I think it's the element of relaxation. The fact that you can lie there for 20 minutes and float away and there's no telephone, there's nobody saying "Do this", and "Will you do that?" I'm sure that's contributing to it in some degree." (Participant 9)

There was discussion about the idea of the placebo effect and about the role of attention; some believed that the effects were due to 'mind over matter', and speculated that the therapy would be more effective if the patients believed it would work.

"I mean I know for other people it did, and it really does help, but why it helps, perhaps because you believe it will help you, you get better." (Participant 2)

One woman queried whether it mattered so long as the therapy was effective. Participants appeared to find this an interesting topic, and further work could be done to look into it in more detail.

Some felt that the treatment had enabled them to feel more in control by teaching them techniques for dealing with the flushes.

"But I've had these phases where I think "Well I'm not coping with them at all they're ruining my, the standard of my life" and then I try and think back to the things I learned when I was having the acupuncture. And it does work to a certain degree. ...I think I continued to have slightly less in number, although some of them have been more intense. But I do think I can sometimes retrieve it and go back a bit, sort of, take control again. It's learning from the whole process that that's possible." (Participant 14)

### Overall impression

The overall impression gained from listening to these women was that they had all found the treatment extremely enjoyable.

"Relaxing and hopeful and all the good things. It certainly was an all-round good experience for me." (Participant 2)

For those whose symptoms had been relieved, their lives had been enormously improved.

"I mean the sweats were the worst and I was getting to the stage where I was, realistically, getting about an hour's sleep a night in total. And now I probably am getting two or three hours at a stretch, which made a huge difference to my life. And my only regret is that I could do with a top-up too, come back on it. Most definitely." (Participant 10)

However even if they had no symptom relief the women had found the experience beneficial, and the experience had converted those who were initially sceptical.

"I think probably most of us went in completely open-minded about it. Because, I mean, I certainly haven't had any experience and no knowledge of acupuncture really. I read into it, but only since, but at the time I had no high hopes or expectations of it, I was totally bowled over." (Participant 10)

### Discussion

The women who took part in these focus groups were only 16 out of a possible total of 48 (two of the women had moved out of the area since completing their treatment). This may have been due to the fact that the groups took place during the summer holiday period, and two were held during the working day. No conclusions can be drawn about the proportions of people holding particular views, nor can inferences be made about the opinions of those who did not attend.

Nevertheless, there were some striking areas of agreement among the participants, most of whom had come into the study with no experience, knowledge or expectations of acupuncture, having unsuccessfully tried a range of alternatives before joining it.

In particular, it seems that, regardless of the symptomatic outcome, women found the experience of having the treatment within a research study to be beneficial. It is not possible from this qualitative study to tease out the various elements that con-



tributed to this, but there is scope for more detailed research in this area. Part of the effect seems to have been the creation of a sense of greater control over both the symptoms themselves, and also of the participants' lives in general, possibly as a result of a greater understanding of the impact of one on the other.

### Conclusion

Acupuncture treatment for women with cancer can be not merely acceptable but a positively enjoyable experience. Traditional acupuncture is seen by its practitioners as a holistic therapy which offers patients more than simply needles at specific points, and this qualitative work certainly indicates that the participants saw themselves as benefiting from both the needling and from what some would regard as non-specific effects of the therapy.

## Appendix

### Acupuncture focus group topic guide

- Can you tell us how you became involved in the study?
- What was your reaction when acupuncture was suggested?
- How did you find the first consultation & health advice?
- What did you expect when you came for your first treatment?
- What was it like actually having the acupuncture?
- Can you tell us about anything that you think may have changed after you had acupuncture?
- Have any of these changes continued in the longer term?
- Did you find anything surprising?
- Can you tell me how you found it filling in the questionnaires and hot flush diaries?
- What was the best thing about having the treatment?
- What was the worst thing?
- What is it like for patients being in a study like this?
- Any other comments

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