



GENERAL ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture Project Gives Addicts New Hope

TAI SOPHIA PILOT PROGRAM SHOWING POSITIVE RESULTS

Editorial Staff

When he was 13 years old, Andre Rigby began using needles to inject drugs into his body. By the time he was 35, he'd dropped out of high school, become addicted to both heroin and cocaine, failed two previous attempts to break his drug addiction, and had been sent to jail three times.

Now, 22 years after his first experience with drugs, Rigby has started to turn his life around using a different kind of needle - one designed to heal instead of harm.

"I don't want to use (drugs) ever again," said Rigby, a resident of Baltimore, Maryland. "This acupuncture thing really helped me ... I see differently, and I think differently, and I feel differently."¹

Rigby is just the latest in a growing number of people who have turned to acupuncture for help in kicking their drug habit. One of the most successful acupuncture detoxification programs in the country is taking place at the Penn North Community Clinic in western Baltimore. Located in one of the poorest parts of the city and run by the TAI Sophia Institute in nearby Columbia, the clinic offers a glimmer of hope for those looking to escape a life of addiction, criminal activity and despair.

The Penn North pilot program began in 1995 with a grant of \$150,000 from the Abell Foundation. In the past five years, the program has been supported largely through the time and skills donated by TAI Sophia faculty, students and alumni, along with approximately \$180,000 in annual contributions from the Institute. Most of the work is performed by student volunteers supervised by licensed acupuncturists, along with a small group of full-time staff from the surrounding area.

At Penn North, acupuncture is just the beginning of an intense three-month program designed to rid patients of their addictions. Initial treatments consist of auricular acupuncture five days a week, gradually progressing to whole body acupuncture. The program includes complementary services such as nutrition counseling; meditation and relaxation classes; tai chi exercises; massage therapy;

and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.



Colby Christy, a clinical supervisor, needles the left ear of a walk-in patient. Photo by Guy Hollyday.

According to Baltimore health commissioner Peter Beilenson, the city spends about \$50 million annually on drug treatment programs. About 20,000 illegal drug users are currently getting treatment, a figure that is expected to expand to 28,000 by 2003. Beilenson expects acupuncture to play a larger role as the number of addicts getting help continues to grow.

In an interview with the *Baltimore Sun*, Beilenson said it was "pretty clear" that acupuncture could help people overcome their addictions, especially as an adjunct to conventional detoxification programs. By reducing the cravings for a particular drug, he said, acupuncture produces both physiological and psychological changes that make it easier for addicts to focus on other aspects of

their life and allow them to succeed in becoming drug-free.²

Scientific studies are beginning to bear out Beilenson's belief. Last year, the Center for Social Research monitored and analyzed a year's worth of patient admissions to the Penn North program. Among the center's findings:

- One-third of the clients entering the program completed the three-month, 40-treatment protocol. The authors of the study said this figure "conforms to acceptable standards of success in the field" of detoxification.
- Arrest rates dropped dramatically for patients who participated in the program. Subjects had an average of 4.31 arrests per person in the 1,000 days prior to entering Penn North; that number dropped to just 0.37 per person arrests in the 1,000 days after joining. Ninety-seven percent of the patients faced no additional charges during the first five months after completion of the acupuncture program.
- Demand for acupuncture services was not limited to just the Penn North area. Analysis of patient zip codes found that more than half of those in the program came from outside the clinic's neighborhood.
- The per-capita cost of treatment was approximately \$336 per person per year, a number the study's authors said "could turn out to be a very inexpensive program by way of comparison."



Tai Sophia president Bob Duggan (shown here) and other volunteer acupuncturists provide individual full-body treatment for patients after they've been clean for one to three months. Photo by Guy Hollyday.

"These results are preliminary, and most of all give us the opportunity to fine-tune our treatment and create even closer relationships with our clients," said Robert Duggan, president of the TAI Sophia Institute. "It appears acupuncture, as a base for a more comprehensive and holistic

intervention, is less invasive and shows a comparatively good rate of success at lower cost."³

The success of the Penn North program has also been due to its close collaboration with "I Can't, We Can," a year-long residential substance abuse program founded in 1997 that serves about 250 residents in the inner city. All of the individuals in "I Can't, We Can" are required to have regular acupuncture treatments, including daily treatments during the first four weeks of the program. Nearly all of them use the Penn North facilities for acupuncture and other services.

Based on the project's positive outcomes, and with support from judges, correction officers and community leaders, the Institute is planning to form a coalition of local organizations, philanthropists and financial institutions in Baltimore. The idea behind the coalition is to help fund the existing program, expand it to other areas of the city and get more organizations involved for support and cooperation, with the eventual goal of making it part of public policy.



"We do not feel acupuncture and related services are the answer for everyone recovering from addiction or incarceration," Duggan emphasized. "But we feel these promising preliminary results show that it offers strong appeal and hope to people in some of Baltimore's most afflicted neighborhoods, and it can be at least as effective as other programs."³

For Rigby, the repeat offender turned recovering addict, the care he's received at Penn North has been nothing short of miraculous. "The acupuncture seemed to relax me," he said after undergoing a full-body treatment that included the insertion of needles in his chest, thighs and feet. He added that acupuncture "made me more comfortable with being open-minded and taking suggestions and actually doing some work on myself."

Five months into the protocol, Rigby says that acupuncture has relieved some of the symptoms of withdrawal. Thanks to the treatment he's been given at the clinic and "I Can't, We Can," he can sleep better at night. What's more, he is finally learning what he wants to do - and who he wants to be.

"Spirituality is doing all the right things for all the right reasons. That's what I want to do," he said.

"I want to change."

References

1. Niedowski E. Acupuncture helping addicts heal. *Baltimore Sun*, June 21, 2001. Available online at www.sunspot.net.
2. Ibid.
3. Independent study shows 5,000-year old Chinese medicine successfully fighting addiction and crime in Baltimore today. TAI Sophia Institute press release, June 21, 2001. Available online at www.tai.edu.

Editor's note: If you are interested in supporting the Penn North Community Clinic acupuncture program, please contact Natalie Mercer at (410) 728-2080 or write to: TAI Sophia Institute, American City Building, 10227 Wincopin Circle Suite 100, Columbia, MD 21044-3422. Contributors who donate \$20 or more will receive a complementary subscription to the TAI Sophia magazine *Meridians*.

