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OCOM, U. of Maryland Receive Acupuncture Research Grants From NCCAM

Editorial Staff

The Oregon College of Oriental Medicine and the University of Maryland have received a pair of research grants totaling \$1.1 million from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, a division of the National Institutes of Health. The grants, awarded by the NCCAM in August, will be used to improve the research literacy and participation skills of acupuncture practitioners, and to investigate the effectiveness of acupuncture in improving pregnancy rates for couples using in vitro fertilization.

"Our Major Goal Is to Train Acupuncturists"



The OCOM grant, which officially began in September, is believed to be the first of its kind awarded to an acupuncture college in the U.S. The objective of the grant is to develop and implement a tiered educational curriculum for acupuncturists interested in conducting research, which can then be used by other acupuncture schools across the country.

"We are delighted to have been selected by NCCAM and NIH to receive this grant," said Dr. Michael Gaeta, the school's president. "With this federal support, the college will be able to develop methodologies to enhance research evaluation and research design competencies of our master's and doctoral students, as well as OCOM's faculty."

The grant amounts to \$700,000 over four years, and will be conducted in two stages. Year one will comprise the planning stage for the development of curricula and educational programs, while years two through four will make up the implementation stage.

Dr. Richard Hammerschlag, OCOM's director of research, will act as the grant's principal investigator. "Our major goal is to train acupuncturists to participate in designing research projects so that clinical trials will reflect the everyday practice of acupuncture, as well as meet the rigorous standards of scientific research," explained Dr. Hammerschlag.

At the end of the fourth year, the college will hold a conference to share educational programs and criteria developed through the grant with the nation's other acupuncture schools.

"As the first acupuncture college in the nation to receive an NCCAM/NIH research education grant, OCOM would like to extend the opportunity for others in the field to share our results," Hammerschlag added.

"Our Goal Is to See If Acupuncture Really Does Work"

At the University of Maryland, meanwhile, specialists at the school's Center for Assisted Reproductive Technologies have received a \$400,000 grant to conduct a three-year pilot study. The study will be conducted in collaboration with the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine, and will examine the role acupuncture plays in improving pregnancy rates among couples who try in vitro fertilization.

"Acupuncture is thought to be helpful in boosting the success of IVF, but our study will be the first to test the theory in a placebo-controlled, double-blind way," explained Dr. Laurence Udoff, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and co-investigator on the study. "Our goal is to see if acupuncture really does work, and if so, why."

The researchers plan to enroll 60 women who are already seeking standard IVF treatment, but who have never had acupuncture. Each woman will receive four treatments during their IVF cycle: the first at the beginning of the cycle (also known as "egg induction"), the second just prior to egg retrieval, the third just before embryo transfer, and the fourth after the embryo has been transferred.

Prior to the first treatment, the women will be randomized into two groups; one will receive traditional Chinese acupuncture, while the other group will receive sham acupuncture. In a press release, Dr. Grant Zhang, a licensed acupuncturist and the study's principal investigator, explained the difference between treatment protocols in each group.

"Sham acupuncture involves placing acupuncture needles in a different place than we normally

would to enhance IVF treatment," Zhang said. "Also, the needles do not penetrate the skin as deeply when we perform the sham procedure."

While previous trials have shown that acupuncture can increase pregnancy rates among couples using IVF, some questions remain about its effectiveness, primarily because most studies have not used a control group, and because of the difficulty in creating a valid form of sham acupuncture. To help ensure credibility, only women who have never had acupuncture will be allowed to enroll in the study. In addition, neither the participants nor their physicians will know which women are receiving real acupuncture.

Although pregnancy rate will be the primary outcome measure of the trial, researchers will use ultrasound to examine physical changes (such as variations in uterine blood flow or endorphin levels in ovarian fluid). In addition, women in both groups will fill out stress questionnaires to help measure psychological changes.

"If we see a positive effect, we also want to understand why it's happening," Dr. Udoff said. "There could be a host of mechanisms at work, including physiological and psychological factors."

Study participants who receive sham acupuncture and do not get pregnant during the IVF cycle will be offered real acupuncture at no charge during a subsequent IVF cycle.

To participate in the trial, interested parties are encouraged to contact Sonya Leasure at (410) 328-2460. For further information regarding the trial, readers may contact Dr. Zhang at gzhang@compmed.umm.edu.

References

1. Oregon College of Oriental Medicine receives \$700,000 national research education grant. OCOM press release, Aug. 30, 2005.
2. University of Maryland researchers investigate possible benefit of acupuncture for in vitro fertilization. University of Maryland press release, September 2005.
3. E-mail from Grant Zhang, PhD, LAc, to *Acupuncture Today*, Oct. 6, 2005.

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